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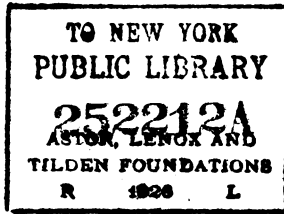
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CHAPTER I

TRAGEDY OR —

IT was a dismal night : damp, cold and foggy. The fog clung like a wet blanket and dimmed even the brightest of the street lamps ; one could hardly see a couple of yards away. It was past dinner time, and yet George Western could not make up his mind to go home ; why, he hardly liked to confess. He had strolled out quite casually about five in the afternoon from his rooms, and had wandered about the streets until the fog and the darkness of the winter's evening made locomotion almost impossible.

He found himself on the Embankment at last. It was not a cheerful place on such a night, yet he stayed there, walking up and down. Perhaps the loneliness of his rooms made him linger, though they were comfortable enough ; perhaps the thought of the monotonous bachelor dinner repelled him for once, though Mrs. Badger was a good enough cook. But that is the worst of

living alone. There come times and seasons when one sickens of the whole affair, the sameness of it all.

That was the simple explanation. The other was that instinct told him to stay, there on the Embankment, in the darkness and the fog, waiting for the crucial moment of his life; waiting for a glimpse of the tall graceful figure and the deep dark eyes; for that brief and mysterious struggle; for the commencement of that play—whether farce or tragedy—in which he was destined to take a part.

Walking up and down slowly Western had turned so often, and had taken so little notice of his whereabouts, that he stopped at last quite bewildered. It was at the corner of a street, but for the life of him he could not see the name of it, nor was there any landmark which he was familiar with to guide him.

He was about to cross the road, when a man and woman passed him, almost brushing his elbow, yet it did not seem to Western that they saw him, for he was standing quite still, and they took no notice of his presence.

He watched them pass on into the fog—they were out of sight in a few yards—and then he followed them. He had not noticed

their appearance, save to remark that both were tall ; but the moment they had passed he knew from the assured way they walked that they were certain of their locality and he determined to ask them his road home. They had vanished into the fog, it is true, but he could hear their footsteps in front of him, and he hurried after them.

Suddenly he started ; for out of the darkness in the direction the couple had taken came a cry, and then a hurried scuffle of feet.

Western pushed on, guided by the sounds, but quite unable to see what caused them : as he drew nearer the scuffling increased, now mingled with the noise of voices. And yet the people who made these mysterious sounds were not talking, he concluded, as he approached them. Rather, the sound reminded him of—what ? And then he remembered ; and for a second he fancied himself back again in Angelo's studio, watching master and pupil at a close bout. Stamp, stamp, and then a quick gliding shuffle : a hoarse " ha ! " and then grunt, grunt, and the hard-drawn breath. Good heavens ! were these people fencing, then ?

Fencing ? no ! fighting, rather. And then Western knew. For as he came up with them and caught a glimpse by the dim rays of

the lamp round which they circled, he saw that it was a struggle in earnest in which they were engaged, perhaps a struggle for life or death.

Startled as he was, he stood for an instant helplessly, and hardly believing his eyes, for it seemed so strange that there on the Thames Embankment, in the cold and darkness of a November fog, two men should be fighting furiously with drawn swords.

The man who faced Western at the moment was tall and thin. It might have been the effect of the lamplight filtering through the fog, but he fancied that his face seemed pale and drawn, and certainly his opponent was pressing him furiously. Western's eyes wandered to the back presented to him, and it struck him that this belonged to the man who had passed him but a few moments before with the woman on his arm—a broad back belonging to a huge physique.

Almost instinctively Western turned to look for the woman. Where was she? And then a quick change in the struggle made him turn again, and he saw that the big man had gained the victory. An alteration in their positions had brought the tall pale man round with his back to Western and he was retreating. Western had barely time

to step aside, when, turning swiftly, the man dodged his opponent and fled. Western caught a glimpse of the conqueror as his huge mass hurled itself after the fugitive, and his sympathies went with him. He had not liked the look of the pale fellow, he had an evil face which the passions of the moment did not improve ; but the victorious man took his fancy at once. He had a big red face, crowned with red hair, and though his features were distorted with anger at the time, Western could well imagine them naturally wearing an amiable and good-natured expression.

And then he was alone in the fog again.

The queer scene had taken place so rapidly, it had been so unexpected, that Western stood dazed for a few seconds. And then he laughed out loud. At one instant tragedy had seemed so near : the next ? What could one call that sudden flight, that swiftly retreating figure, that huge mass pounding in pursuit, but, as he could hear, more hopelessly distanced every instant.

He moved on slowly, listening to the dying sounds, and then he stopped again ; for a figure came up out of the fog behind and touched his arm.

He turned quickly. It was a woman :

the woman, he supposed. "What do you want?" he said harshly, half startled.

"Excuse me; forgive me for speaking to you, but——"

Astonished, Western raised his hat and strove to pierce the fog. The voice was a lady's, there was no doubt of that, and if its owner bore any resemblance to it, of a lovely one. But he could make out little. He had moved away from the lamp, and all the fog permitted him to see was a tall slim figure, standing by his side. In the darkness he could fancy, under the spell of that sweet low voice, a form graceful and rounded in its slimness, a noble poise of head and neck.

"Certainly," he said hastily. "I beg your pardon, but I did not know there was any one near me. What can I do?"

The answer came hesitatingly. "I thought you were a gentleman; I listened and heard you laugh."

"Well, it was so unexpected, the end of it," Western said, smiling again. "I had expected tragedy and found——"

"It *is* tragedy, or rather it may be. But for Heaven's sake listen; do what I ask! Take this; quick, take it! Oh, don't hesitate!"

And Western felt a little envelope rapidly pressed into his hand.

“And now your name? Quick! Oh, any moment it may be too late! I am alone and helpless. That wretch fled so suddenly—hush!”

Startled, they listened, but no sound came from the darkness.

“We are quite alone,” said Western, “do not be afraid. There is no one near.”

“And your name?”

Western hesitated — “My name — well, really.”

The figure at his side stiffened suddenly, and then her head seemed to droop. He heard a quick tapping of her foot and a little gasp of anxiety, trouble, almost a sob, as she murmured.

“I have been mistaken. I beg your pardon. But, of course, it is natural. What must you think? Please give me back the paper.”

But Western had decided promptly. The sweet low voice, the graceful drooping figure, the trouble she attempted in vain to disguise, the hopeless despair at her failure, made him resolve to help this woman, even if it brought him disaster—yet what danger could the giving of his name bring?

“I have been a brute,” he said quickly.

“I will keep this paper. You are afraid

and you want me to take care of it until you send for it. Is that it? And of course you want to know who I am and where to send."

A gasp of gratitude repaid him for his speech; and the tall graceful figure straightened itself again.

"Oh, thank you, yes!" came the answer.

"Well, I live at 200, Duke Street. I will take care of this paper for you with pleasure. My name is Western, George Western."

"Oh!"

"I beg your pardon," said Western, surprised.

"Western? Did you say Western?"

"Yes. But you don't know me? I don't know you, do I?" asked Western, trying vainly to get a glimpse of his companion's features.

"Western! How strange! But, of course, it is a coincidence merely, for you said Duke Street. No, you do not know me, sir. See! I am a stranger to you."

With a quick proud gesture, the woman raised her veil. He had a short uncertain glance at deep and lovely eyes, a pale rounded face and curved crimson lips, and then a sound made both turn swiftly.

The girl, for Western had guessed her, from his brief glimpse, to be not more than nineteen, gave a little cry.

"There is some one near," she murmured.
"I feared so. Oh, please go at once!"

"But you?" he said anxiously.

"Don't think of me. Go! straight to your rooms, as fast as you can; and keep to the more frequented thoroughfares. Lock that paper up where it will be safe. They cannot, oh, they cannot think that you have it! Good-bye. Believe me, I am grateful."

But Western still hesitated. "Surely I cannot leave you, if you are in danger," he said.

"I am in no danger. It is the paper they want. Without that I am as safe as in my own home. Without you I should have been helpless to keep it from them. But they cannot know you have it. Surely we did not speak loud enough for any one to hear."

Western shook his head. "The only thing any one may have heard is my name, and they are welcome to that."

"My father will thank you some day for your kindness."

"And you?" said Western, trying to see through the darkness.

"I; I thank you now, and perhaps—but who knows? Good-bye."

And she was gone.

For a moment Western lingered, listening to the light rustle of her skirt, and then he turned and walked on.

When he reached his rooms it was late in the evening, and poor old Mrs. Badger, Western's landlady, was already groaning over a dinner *manqué*. To pacify her, he hurried to his bedroom and dressed quickly, forgetting the paper he had so mysteriously become possessed of, and anxious only to get rid of the old lady and her cookery, and have the house to himself.

He wanted to be quiet and think over the events of the evening, and he knew that until he had fed, and complimented his old landlady on the dinner, quiet was impossible. Quiet and Mrs. Badger did not know one another.

When at last he had done his duty and the table had been cleared, he wheeled his arm-chair up to the fire, and sat down to think.

But he did not get far in his elucidation of the mystery of the evening. His thought would linger on that sweet low voice which he still seemed to hear so plainly, on that pale and lovely face, of which he had had a

glimpse so brief as to be only tantalizing, yet which had made his heart beat wildly for a moment, which still made it leap when he recalled it.

And, then he recollected the paper. So far as he remembered, it had been simply an ordinary letter in an envelope. He could not, of course, open it, but the desire to examine it was irresistible and he rose to seek it.

As Western reached the dining-room again, and held the square packet under the light, he stood stupefied, the blood rushing to his heart, and his eyes staring.

“Count de Chevreux,
“Hillersley,
“Worcestershire.”

No wonder he was amazed, for the name on the envelope was that of his father's oldest friend, and the hand that had written the address was his dead father's own.

Had his father's hand been laid on his shoulder at that instant, Western could not have been more thunderstruck than he was at the sight of that superscription.

“Count de Chevreux!” How many times, he had seen his father write those words; how often, even, had he himself posted letters bearing that name. Why, as a child

Western remembered begging to be allowed to put his first letter into the post-box, and that letter bore this address !

His father's oldest friend ; of late years, busy man that he was, almost his only friend. And now, a year after his death, come in such mysterious fashion, he held in his hand this paper written nearly three years before. A letter from a dead man to a dead man—for both were gone.

How strange—how awfully strange ! Stupefied, bewildered, he stood twisting the envelope in his hands, recalling again the circumstances under which it had reached him. He saw again the couple pass him in the fog, heard the scuffling, the hoarse ejaculations of the fencers. He felt the timid touch on his arm, the terror in the voice of the helpless girl left alone in the night in fear of what ? of whom ?

What did it mean, this almost supernatural coincidence ? What was this mystery ? Would this letter tell him ? And even so, could he read it ?

For a moment Western hesitated. Only for a moment, and then he yielded. He had no right to open this envelope, he felt ; yet it had been opened already and read by his father's friend, it was written by his

father who was dead ; and the people he had seen that night could be but strangers. Surely he might have the right, where in another it would be dishonourable, to read a letter which was of such importance that two men had been ready to shed each other's blood for its possession, which by the hand of fate had come so strangely into his keeping.

So he reasoned—if in his excited state it could be called reason—and in a second the contents of the envelope were before him.

“ MY DEAR ALBERT ”—the letter ran—“ Be easy in your mind from this hour. You have conquered both the physician and the friend. The arguments you have used have prevailed as you knew they must. You knew your old friend well when you wrote that letter. My dear Albert, my very dear Albert, may its result make you happy. That is my wish and the only word with reference to this subject you will ever hear from me. My certificate, as her medical attendant, vouches for the death of Madame the Comtesse at 4 p.m on the 15th, and that of your son half an hour later.

“ Believe me, my dear Albert,

“ Most truly yours,

“ JOHN WESTERN.”

Western read the letter through, and then again, and sat for a time buried in thought.

He could come to no conclusion however. That his father had done something which the Count, his old friend, had begged him to do was evident ; that he had done it unwillingly, influenced by a strong appeal to that friendship, was also evident ; but what it was he had done, or what the death of the Countess and her son could have to do with it, he could not fathom ; and tired at last of puzzling over the affair, he put the letter back into its envelope, shut it up in his desk, and went to bed.

In the morning, by the cold light of a November day, he was no nearer a solution of the mystery than on the previous night, though, if anything, looked at by daylight, his adventures seemed stranger than ever.

Would he hear anything more of those furious swordsmen ? Would he see again that beautiful girl ? Or would the whole affair remain shrouded in mystery, and only the letter live to tell him he had glanced into those lovely eyes ?

As Western pondered, there came another question, what did he hope ? But that, too, seemed as unanswerable as the Sphinx's riddle.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

THE day following Western's adventure in the fog found him still unsettled. He tried to read ; his attention wandered from his book to write, but the thoughts wouldn't come. He left the house thinking that a brisk walk might relieve his mind, and in half an hour he found himself on the Embankment, pacing up and down the spot he fancied to be the scene of his experiences the night before. What could that affair in the fog mean ? Who was that girl ? What was the secret the letter held ?

When he found his mind going over this ground again, he turned back to his rooms. It was a cold bleak morning, and if he was destined to spend it in worrying himself out of an impossible cul-de-sac, he had better do so at home comfortably before the fire. Besides, another thought had struck him.

Returning to his place, he made his way to a little room at the top of the house, where he

kept his boxes and such household goods as he had not liked to part with when his father's death had broken up his home.

After some trouble he discovered the articles he was in search of—a couple of books bound in Russian leather; and putting them under his arm, he descended to his study.

Western had a distaste for keeping about him things once used by the dead, and he had retained in his own rooms very few of the articles which had belonged to his father, the well-known physician, in his house in Harley Street.

But these two books, his diary for the last two years of his life, he had not liked to part with.

They were not very fully or regularly kept, Western knew (his father's professional books unfortunately had been burned before his death); but they might give him some clue to the meaning of the letter which so exercised his mind, and he opened them with curiosity.

As it happened, they contained very little reference to the Count de Chevreux, and inquisitiveness in that direction seemed likely to meet with small satisfaction. "Saw Albert," "Albert came to dinner," "Heard from Albert"—these mostly at the commencement of the earlier book, and then a long

as interval in which it seemed that all cor-
r's correspondence had ceased between the old
friends.

he This did not strike Western as surprising,
ks for he knew that of late years his father had
m seen little of the Count. His duties had kept
ut him so occupied that he had rarely time to
he pay visits away from town, and the Count
of lived a very retired life at his country place
er, and hardly ever came to London. As for
in Western he had not seen him for many years,
the friendship, close as it was, not extending
beyond the two men themselves.

st He had read almost to the end of the second
rt book before he came again upon the Count's
name, and this time he perused the lines
t, with interest. They ran as follows :—

s “August 3. Heard from Albert de Chev-
s reux. He reminds me of an old promise.
An interesting event is expected early in
September, and I promised to be present at
the birth of the heir he so ardently longs for.
Certainly he is to be congratulated to marry
past sixty and see his hopes so soon real-
ized. This would have proved bad for poor
Victor, I fear. Poor Victor, to think it is
nearly twenty years since his mother died !
Ah, well, I am getting an old man.”

The second entry was :—

"*September 4.* Heard again from Albert. He expects me on the 8th. Madame joins in urging me to keep my promise. It will mean a heavy loss to me, and I shall offend some good patients ; but I can well afford it for friendship's sake, a friendship of forty years. Yes, I must go. They both wish it ; Albert certainly puts great value on my presence. Is he so fond of his new Countess that he so ardently desires this child ? Does he at last think Victor dead ? Or is there some other reason ? Have written Morgan to take my work."

—"*September 16.* Returned from Hillersley, but must go down to-morrow. Poor, poor Albert ! It is too terrible ! Mother and child in one day. Nothing could be done. She grew weaker and weaker, and passed quietly away. Fortunately she had no pain, poor creature. She died unconscious half an hour after her child."

The diary ceased at this date, a date which Western remembered well, as he had cause to. For at the time the lines must have been penned he was lying at death's door in Paris, whither he had gone for a month's holiday, and on that very day his father was telegraphed for to his bedside. Strange he should have never taken up his diary

again. But it was the last entry — the remainder of the book was blank.

There is something exceptionally sad in reading the diary of one who was loved and is dead, and Western sat for some time gazing at the writing before him, and recalling his father's grey hair and fine kindly intellectual face. Indeed, so engrossed was he with memories of the past that though his eyes were fixed on the page in front of him, they only wandered idly over the words it contained.

These at last, however, commenced to force themselves on him with such persistence that he concentrated his attention once more, and re-read them, concluding with the line: "She died unconscious half an hour after her child."

And then he paled suddenly. Why, what did that mean? The letter in his desk; surely that letter—but, no, of course, he must be mistaken! Nevertheless he sprang to his feet and sought the mysterious letter with trembling fingers. And as he glanced at its contents, stamped for the future on his brain, he sank back into his chair again, confused and dismayed.

"My certificate, as her medical attendant, vouches for the death of Madame the Countess

at 4 p.m. on the 15th, and that of your son half an hour later."

Was *this* then the secret of the letter's value? Was *this* the meaning of his strange adventure and the intrigue he had caught a glimpse of?

And did it mean shame to him?

He bit his lip; his handsome young face pale and set. In this strange contradiction of the letter by the diary was there some slur upon his father's name? And then he laughed aloud at the thought. His father! The soul of honour; a man whose direct and honest character was almost a byword: it was impossible, absurd!

Yet the mystery of the affair became none the less irritating for his decision on that point; indeed, with every thought he gave it it seemed to grow but the more confused. Try as he would to find some meaning to it all a solution would not come, and he could only sit with the letter and diary in his hands, and gaze gloomily into the fire.

Suddenly a knock came at the door, and he started violently, aroused from his dreaming by the entrance of Mrs. Badger.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," she said.

Western looked round quickly. Had she shown him in?

"I can see no one this morning," he said.
"What is his name?"

But it was too late. A step already
resounded in the passage. A deep rich voice
answered his question from the threshold:—

"Father Pink," it said.

CHAPTER III

A JOVIAL PRIEST

SURPRISED, Western scrambled to his feet. A strange confusion had suddenly seized him at being discovered thus, by a stranger, with this letter and this diary in his hands. Involuntarily he attempted a hasty disposal of the accursed things, and failed miserably. Recognizing the absurdity of the attempt, he made an effort to pull himself together. He turned and faced the intruder with the diary bulging from his coat pocket and the letter on the floor at his feet (he had intended to put the letter in his pocket and the book under the armchair).

But his visitor had not apparently noticed his confusion, and had no intention of giving him time to dwell upon it.

“How do you do, Mr. Western?” he said frankly. “Forgive me—but really you have so many things to forgive that I hardly know which to commence with. Forgive me for not waiting to be announced; forgive

me for calling at this hour of the day ; forgive me that, having a letter of introduction to you, I have brought it myself instead of sending it, as I believe I should have done ; forgive an old priest like myself for troubling a young bachelor like you at all ; and forgive me for sitting down suddenly without waiting to be asked, for I am a heavy man, and (though I have many things to be thankful for) my legs are not always equal to the weight they have to carry. But here is my recommendation to you."

Still dazed and confused, or rather more dazed and confused than ever, Western heard his strongest chair creak violently ; he saw a huge black-frocked body sink down with a sigh of content, and he felt a letter passed into his fingers from a large white hand which gave a friendly squeeze as it fulfilled its mission.

Fascinated, he watched this hand return to join its companion in a placid embrace over a huge expanse of black, where should have been its owner's waist, and then his eyes turned to the letter :—

" DEAR GEORGIE-PORGIE,—

" This is to introduce Father Pink. Don't be frightened at him, he won't bite. He

is the best fellow in the world, but you'll find that out for yourself, and always be grateful for the introduction to

“Your old friend,
“NEVILL.”

Nevill Graham and a priest ! The most volatile, the most careless, the most irresponsible man in London introducing to Western as the “best fellow in the world” a middle-aged priest—Father Pink !

He turned and looked at his guest. He saw seated in his armchair, which had groaned beneath his weight, a man whose age might have been anything from forty-five to sixty ; a man probably not taller than five feet six, but whose huge breadth of shoulder and great bulk made seem gigantic. He saw a head which corresponded to this body—a massive head supported by a neck, massive too, but so short as to make one with the shoulders ; a broad brow beneath the shaven circle of the crown, two laughing black eyes, a huge red nose, a massive jaw with at least two double chins, and a firm but well-curved sensual mouth.

He had plenty of time to take all this in as Father Pink made no attempt to interrupt him in his examination. He sat there before

the fire, the picture of contentment, his eyes wandering placidly over Western's belongings, his hands folded over his stomach, his large feet spread out before him, and a sound which was like nothing so much as a deep purr issuing from his broad chest.

He turned at last and smiled heartily at Western.

"And now you know all about me," he said.

"Know all about him!" Western involuntarily glanced back at Nevill's brief note, and Father Pink's eyes twinkled, but he took no other notice.

"He's a good boy, Nevill!" he said, "and we had a great time together a couple of months ago. He's a rascal; I could tell you—but that's neither here nor there. Ah, you young men, ha, ha! and we old ones, ho, ho! Well, well! But look ye, ye'll be wondering why I've descended on you like this. The truth is, I wanted to meet your father's son (I wanted to meet your father, but, my poor boy, I hear he's gone. Well, well, he's with the saints now). So I wanted to make your acquaintance and say, 'My boy, your father saved my life; if there is anything a poor old priest can do for you, tell him and he'll do it; so long it

isn't to run half a mile, ha, ha, ha ! and he'd even try to do that, ho, ho ! Yes, my boy, your father saved my life.' ”

“ I am very glad to hear it,” said Western. “ How was that ? ”

“ It is some years ago now. Ah, I was very bad. But the brains your father had ! The way he put his finger on the right spot without doubt or question ! Well, I have been abroad since then, and, coming back, I thought, ‘ First thank the man who saved your life,’ and then I heard he was dead, poor good man ! And then I heard of you—but, forgive me, my boy, I'm sorry to trouble you. Ah ! oooh ! let me alone a minute. I'll be all right in a minute, Holy Saints ! ”

Startled, Western glared at him. He was turning purple, and, like the fat boy in *Pickwick*, he was visibly swelling.

He turned his black eyes to Western with a comical expression of pain mixed with humour, while his large white hands flapped helplessly.

“ It's—it's nothing,” he gasped. “ Mais, oh, Mon Dieu ; ça touche tout le même—” and his face turned a deeper purple, and the whites of his eyes rolled terribly.

Western started to his side, “ You had

better lie down, you are not well, the room is too hot for you," he said quickly. "Let me get something for you."

Father Pink's face expressed relief. "My boy, if you would be so kind! But, no, I can't trouble you; still, if you had such a thing near by—a drop of brandy or whisky."

"Yes, of course, certainly; I will get it in a second," Western said with alacrity. "But are you sure that brandy is the best thing? I have plenty in the next room."

"Then it will save my life," Father Pink returned, looking better already. "And then the son'll have done as well as the father! Ochone! here it comes again! It's too much blood I have!"

Western saw him turning still more purple, and, though doubtful of the value of the remedy he proposed, he flew to get the brandy from the dining-room, anxious yet laughing in spite of himself as he recalled the priest's comical face, with its expression of terror and jovial good nature so queerly intermingled.

He was some time in getting the spirit, as he had to open a fresh bottle, and the corkscrew had disappeared, as corkscrews do.

At that time Western's suspicions were

not in the least aroused, yet even then he had a momentary shock as he returned to the room where he had left Father Pink and opened the door.

He was obliged to do this rather slowly, as he held the brandy bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, and his fingers were shaking a little with the excitement of the incident; but as the door opened for a second, he had the swift impression of some heavy body moving with incredible ease and agility across the room, to sink into the chair where he had left Father Pink seated. It was not an impression easy to define, for it came neither entirely from his eyes nor his ears. He could certainly not see the whole of the room in opening the door, and the moment he thought over it he came to the conclusion that he must have been mistaken; yet the impression remained in his mind in a vague way even when he saw Father Pink reclining as he had left him, still breathing heavily and purple in the face.

Then Western remembered his huge bulk, the heavy way he performed every movement, and the piteous manner in which his chair had creaked on its first reception of him. It was certain the chair had not creaked

on *this* occasion, and the body he had momentarily fancied he saw cross the room had flown rather than lumbered to the chair.

So the impression only lingered in the vaguest way at the time, and his services were entirely occupied in administering the brandy to the suffering man and watching his purple cheeks recover their usual hue.

"Thank you, thank you," he murmured, as he swallowed half a tumbler of the liquor which Western held out to him, and sat up in his chair. "I am better, the Saints be praised! I am quite well now. It was a happy thought that!"

"What?" said Western.

Father Pink's eyes turned to him, quite clear now, and with the old jovial twinkle in their black depths. "The brandy," he said quickly. "Ha, ha, the brandy! And now, let me sit here a few minutes and pull myself together. You must forgive an old man all the trouble he's put you to. Sure, kindness of heart is in your family; and good looks, too! What a handsome boy you are! How old are you? Twenty-six? Well, well. Tell me about yourself, my boy. Nevill can't stop talking of you."

Western did his best to comply with Father Pink's request, and told him such

particulars as he thought might interest him, but it is certain that the worthy father himself monopolized most of the talk. And Western could not regret that it was so ; for a more brilliant, more entertaining conversationalist than this strange priest he had to confess he had never met.

Once started nothing stopped him. Anecdotes, recollections, tales of rollicking humour and extremely broad fun—he rolled them off in one continuous round.

He would have made a marvellous actor, Western thought, as he watched him, spell-bound, now telling a comical incident that convulsed him with laughter, now relating some pathetic story connected with his priestly vocation which brought tears to his eye and to Western's too, and caused the latter to remember the robe this strange priest wore, a robe which the generous breadth of a previous anecdote had led him entirely to forget.

A most fascinating man, Father Pink, undoubtedly ; a man of the world in the largest sense, a man of wide travel and experience, of brilliant intellect comically mingled with an almost gross capacity for enjoyment and amusement ; a man of no particular nationality apparently, for he helped out his con-

versation with the queerest little scraps of colloquialisms in half a dozen tongues, and when occasionally Western was on the point of deciding him to be a German or a Swede, some few words in perfect Italian, or a comical touch of Irish brogue, would send him astray again, and he would give up the attempt to classify him.

Western was quite disappointed when he rose at last to say farewell, and a glance at the clock told him that the worthy priest's visit had lasted nearly an hour. He refused politely Western's invitation to lunch, and grasped his hand heartily as he did so.

"No, no, not to-day," he said. "You have had enough of my dull company, and you are already wondering why a foolish old priest has kept a young man about town so long from his own amusements. But you must come and see me, my boy! Come and dine with me next week; come on Wednesday, yes, Wednesday, eh? I'll give you a dinner—well, I must not boast, but I've got an old cook who would beat the Old Gentleman himself; not at a grill, ha, ha! but at a nice little friendly dinner, not too many courses, but just enough to make you want more. We old priests, you know, we can have so few amusements. Not like

Luther with his wine, women, and song, eh? ha, ha! Though upon my word, they aren't three bad things, those same three. Well, well, if I were only young again! But what was Luther dreaming of to leave out a good dinner? Well, well, good-bye, my boy, good-bye."

Talking all the time, and grasping Western's arm, just above the elbow, between his muscular finger and thumb, Father Pink guided him before him out of the room and along the passage to the front door, where, shaking his hand heartily and bidding him farewell again, he left him and passed out into the street.

Western watched his burly figure descend the steps with heavy feet, and turned back into his rooms, still half dazed, hardly awakened from the dreamy condition into which Father Pink's overpowering personality had sunk him. But he had no sooner reached his study than he remembered that the priest had not given him the address where he was to dine, and that he had quite forgotten to ask for it.

However, slowly as Father Pink moved, he felt sure of catching him before he turned out of the street, and he hurried back to the front door. And then he stared in astonish-

ment. At the rate Father Pink had descended the steps Western had expected to see him ten or twenty yards away ; but to his surprise, in all the long street, there was no sign of the huge form and the black gown it carried so strangely.

Unable to believe his eyes he darted down the steps, and from the centre of the roadway looked quickly up and down. And then he bit his lips suddenly. For, far away in the distance, farther than he had even thought at first of looking, round a corner waddled a fat figure, waved and disappeared a skirt of black.

Western returned slowly to his rooms. At the pace Father Pink had moved about them, at the rate he had descended the steps, he would have reached that distant corner in about ten minutes. A quick pedestrian might have done it, using considerable exertion, in three minutes. Father Pink had accomplished the feat in two.

CHAPTER IV

A SINGULAR ASSIGNATION

WESTERN had known Father Pink, if he could say he knew him, for a little over an hour, yet when he returned to his rooms the apartment seemed bare without him. Even the walls appeared to re-echo still his deep rich tones ; even the armchair seemed still to creak beneath his massive frame ; yet, these vivid recollections of his presence only made his absence more marked, and caused the room, brief as his occupancy of it had been, to appear changed henceforth.

Western sat down, and, staring into the fire, recalled his singular interview, following it back step by step, from the flying figure he had watched disappearing round the corner to the first deep announcement of Father Pink's name and entrance into his life. And then he started to his feet.

For he recalled his strange discovery that the mysterious letter had contradicted the story which the diary told ; he recalled the moment when the sudden entrance of

Mrs. Badger made him vainly attempt to dispose of those documents whose presence had become a thing to be ashamed of ; he recalled his confusion at the bulging of the book from his pocket ; he recalled the letter which had missed its address (the armchair) and fallen on the carpet—and his eyes turned to look for it. It was gone ! and the spot where it had lain, so prominently as it had seemed to Western, was the spot where Father Pink had placed his feet.

Vainly, helplessly, he searched the apartment, and even summoned Mrs. Badger to assure himself that she had not touched the missing document. She had not, of course ; he found nothing, of course. He knew he would not, and he cursed his folly, even while he recognised the certainty of his loss, and reddened as he realized what a dupe he had been.

But if he knew anything, he knew now where the letter was. Ah ! Father Pink !

Western saw no more of Father Pink that day, though he tried vainly to convince himself that the worthy Father had picked up the letter by accident and would arrive each instant to return it. For twenty-four hours he heard no more of his mysterious adventure ; and then on the morning of

the second day a letter awaited him upon his breakfast table.

It was addressed to George Western, Esq., 200, Duke Street, in a woman's hand, and Western felt his heart instinctively quicken as he opened the envelope and read the first words :—

“ Mr. Western assisted a lady out of a difficulty two nights ago by taking charge of a letter which the lady feared to lose. The danger having now passed, the writer begs to relieve Mr. Western of his charge, while thanking him again for what he did.

“ At the time there was no knowledge that Mr. Western was in any way connected with the writer of this important document ; but it has since appeared that Mr. Western may himself have in the matter an interest only second to that of the original possessors of the letter. Should this be so, and should Mr. Western desire to receive further information, at the same time returning the letter he so kindly took charge of, he is requested to carry out fully and exactly the following instructions :—

“ On Thursday, the 12th, the day following the receipt of this, at five o'clock in the afternoon, he will go to the Hôtel Métropole,

Northumberland Avenue. Attracting as little attention as possible, and making no inquiries, he will proceed to the third floor of the building. Here a passage on the left leads to the numbers running from 225 ; the fifth door on the right is number 235. Mr. Western will knock three times at this door and enter immediately. The writer is compelled at this point to impress upon Mr. Western the necessity of following implicitly the instructions given, and to request him to consider that, from the moment he receives this letter, he is bound upon his honour either to decline to notice it at all, or to obey it implicitly.

“ When Mr. Western opens the door, the lady whom he so chivalrously assisted will be in the room ; he will be able to hand her the letter ; he will be able to ask any questions he may care to ask, and he will be able to give any assistance he may wish to give to unravel a mystery in which he may hereafter find he had a vital interest ; but the conditions under which the interview will take place, should Mr. Western decide to go on with the matter, are imperative and unchangeable, and a moment’s thought will convince him of their necessity.

“ When Mr. Western opens the door of No.

235 he will find the room in absolute darkness. At five o'clock the outside passage will still be unlighted. The instructions impressed on Mr. Western are that he shall make no attempt to light the apartment, or to see the face of the person he is talking to.

"The writer imagines that Mr. Western will understand perfectly the necessity for this arrangement ; but should he not, and should he (which the writer does not fear for a moment) feel any anxiety for his personal safety, he is reminded that he will be in a room in a crowded hotel, with a hundred people within call, and that, while not at liberty to strike a light, he is free at any moment to open the door and leave the room."

If his heart beat rather quickly upon reading the first lines of this strange document, Western's state of excitement was considerably increased by the time he reached the conclusion.

Was he to see her again—that mysterious young beauty, a glimpse of whose features had so attracted him on that evening in the fog ? See her ? No, by Jove ! he was not to see her. He was to meet her in darkness—darkness impenetrable, complete. And he was to be on his honour to let the darkness

remain. What a strange, what an unheard of assignation. And why in the darkness? Had she forgotten that she had of her own freewill given Western one moment's vision of her beauty? Perhaps so. Probably it was merely in the excitement of the moment that she had raised her veil, and now she regretted it, or thought he had but caught a glimpse. Yes, that must be it.

And then as he recalled this girl's dark eyes and sweet low voice, her anxiety for the safety of the letter which he had so foolishly placed in her enemy's hands, Western felt glad that the meeting was to be in darkness. He felt that he could never meet her gaze and tell her that what her courage and quickness had accomplished his folly had undone; that the letter was gone!

When Western had discovered his father's connection with this mystery, he had fully decided that when approached to give up the letter he would at least demand from its receiver an explanation which would set his mind at rest. Now he felt how weak his position must be. He must confess to this girl that her courage had been useless, her confidence misplaced, that the letter was gone! How could he hope to obtain from her under those circumstances the

information he desired? Yet he must go; he must keep the appointment; oh, certainly he must go, he told himself.

And then he recollected the diary—that diary which had so strangely contradicted the letter. That diary might contain matters of interest as important to these people as the missing document itself.

Possessing this book, it seemed to Western, that if he were cautious and diplomatic, he held a valuable lever; and he determined to take it with him hidden in his pocket. Care was necessary, of course, for it seemed a question of his father's name; but that this girl was anything but good and pure as she was beautiful Western could not doubt, swiftly as she had dropped her veil, and he had no fear. At the worst, an attempt to rob him of it would arouse the whole hotel.

And then he forgot all anxious thoughts and lost himself in the possibilities of this strange and alluring interview. The writer of the letter had undervalued herself if she imagined that Western had forgotten her so soon, that he would not recognize her figure, her height, her voice even in the darkness. Oh, yes, he should know her, he thought, with a thrill, and his pulse beat high for the morrow.

CHAPTER V

THE INTERVIEW IN THE DARK

AT a quarter to five in the afternoon of the following day Western was standing on the steps of the Hôtel Métropole, nervously looking at his watch, and thinking of the coming interview.

It seemed stranger than ever, now that he was so near it, this assignation in the darkness of an unknown room, with a girl so mysterious, a girl whose very name he was ignorant of, but who was so beautiful. If some trap lay behind it all? Yet what trap could lie?

Still, as the time drew nearer, Western felt an almost irresistible inclination to break the pledge implied by his presence there. The hall-porter stood at his side: the clerks were at the bureau; it would be so easy to ask a question or two as to the occupant of room No. 235. But he restrained himself. By coming to the interview he had accepted the conditions laid down. He was bound in honour; there was nothing for it but patience; and he stood watching the passers-by, wondering if "She"

were already in the mysterious room, or if she would arrive as the time drew near.


He saw no one pass, however, who in the least resembled "her," and at last the hour struck.

Western pulled himself together, and, with a glance at a mirror, a proceeding which the next moment struck him as singularly futile considering the conditions of the interview, he mounted the stairs.

He had decided not to take the lift, as by walking up he might attract less attention, and, to his relief, he met no one on the stairs. Reaching the third landing, he saw the passage on the left with the announcement of the numbers it contained, and with a beating heart he turned the corner.

The writer of the letter at least knew the customs of the hotel well, or the matter had been purposely arranged, for, as he had been warned beforehand, the passage was as yet unlighted, and, the winter evening having drawn on, it was hardly possible, in the dimness, even to recognize the numbers on the doors.

However, the words of the letter were imprinted on Western's mind, and he remembered that it was the fifth room at which he was to halt.



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The carpet with which the passage was covered was thick and heavy, and his feet made no noise as he approached the room ; and, hesitating on the threshold, sure of not being heard, he listened for a moment, for some sound within.

Was she there, this girl whom he had saved (as she, alas ! thought) from what must have been some great and pressing danger ? Was she there in that darkened room, awaiting him, nervous, perhaps, as he was nervous himself, man that he was ; waiting for that letter which must mean so much to her ; dreading, as he could have no cause to dread, the breaking of the conditions, the quick flash of a match, his recognition of her features ? But why should she dread that so much, Western wondered. Was she married, and was this but some vulgar intrigue into which he had been dragged ? He could not think it, remembering her face. Then what was it ? But he smiled. He could know when he chose. Why stand puzzling his brains on the threshold of this room when he had only to knock and he would know all ?

And he knocked : three sharp blows.

For a moment there was silence. Then came a quick rustle of silk from within the room and a low voice said—" Come in ! "

With his heart in his mouth Western turned the handle and entered.

He had no sooner crossed the threshold than a figure glided quickly forward and closed the door behind him. Useless precaution, for the dim passage allowed no light to penetrate into the inky blackness of this room: blackness so complete that he stood bewildered, hesitating like a blind man set down suddenly in a strange street, listening with strained ears, and half inclined, now that the moment had come, to turn and bolt before the interview could commence. Then he heard the gentle rustle of the silk again, and the sound of a chair being drawn near.

"Here is a chair," said a low voice, almost a whisper; "here, just here! Won't you sit down?"

Western felt the seat pressed against his knees, and, taking it, he seated himself, trying vainly to catch even a glimpse of this woman who was so near to him, yet who was as invisible as if a wall had separated them.

"Can you see in the dark, then?" he said. "I am perfectly bewildered myself."

He heard a low laugh. "A little," came the reply. "My eyes are green, dark green, you know. I believe they are generally supposed to have that power."

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"Then you have an unfair advantage of me," Western said, smiling. "Suppose—suppose I break my word."

He heard a swift movement. "But you won't," came anxiously. "You are a gentleman. You are bound in honour."

The anxiety in the speaker's tone was so evident that Western hastened to set her mind at rest. "Certainly I am bound," he said quickly. "My presence here is an assurance that I accepted your conditions. I presume it was you who wrote the letter I received yesterday."

"Yes, it was I. But the charge which you undertook? the other letter? you have brought it with you?"

Western started. He had forgotten for the moment that accursed letter. How was he to tell her? Thank Heaven it was dark.

"The letter," he stammered. "Ah, yes, the letter—how can I tell you?"

"You have not lost it!"

"Lost—no, but— Ah, I assure you I would have guarded it with my life, still it is gone. It was stolen from me."

In the darkness Western felt his companion lean towards him eagerly. He seemed to hear her quickly-heaving bosom, almost to feel her scented breath touch his cheek.

"Gone!" she said eagerly. "Stolen! Oh, surely not." And then the eager voice broke, and he heard the sound of deep and uncontrolled grief.

She was weeping, this lovely girl, weeping bitterly. What a brute he had been! What a fool to let himself be robbed so easily, without an effort! That priest, that cursed priest, that old fat humbug, what a reckoning there should be if they ever met again!

Like most men, Western hated to hear a woman cry, and as he remembered the face of the lovely girl he had seen for a moment in the fog, and realized that she was near him now, sobbing bitterly in the darkness, and sobbing through his fault, he lost his head.

"What a fool, what a brute you will think me!" he said, biting his lips, "but I was robbed of it so cleverly by such devilish artfulness. How could I tell! Oh, that villainous old priest!"

"A priest? It was a priest who took the letter?"

"Yes. A priest who called himself Father Pink. An old fat Jesuit who——"

"You are sure of it? There can be no mistake?"

"None; I am sure of it." And Western quickly related the story of Father Pink's treachery.

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"Then it is lost indeed," murmured his companion. "It is useless to seek for it if he has it."

The voice broke again, and again Western heard the sound of sobbing.

Half maddened he left his chair and stumbled in the darkness to where the agitated girl was seated. "Oh, tell me what I can do for you," he stammered. "How can I make up for my want of care? Don't cry! let me beg of you not to cry!"

He caught a hand in the blackness, and pressed it in his. To his relief it was not withdrawn, and as he felt in its fingers the little lace handkerchief wet with tears, he pressed his lips to it quickly.

"Surely it is not too late still to repair my error," he begged. "I will hunt down that old rascal; I will wrest that letter from him. Tell me what to do. Look on me as devoted entirely to your wishes. Don't cry so bitterly; there is always some way out of even the blackest case. Why, I don't, of course know the story of this letter, though as you are aware my name is connected with it; but I may be able to help you even yet. Listen, it is possible, it is just possible, that I may have information which neither this priest nor yourself may possess——"

Western heard the sobbing cease suddenly, and he felt the little warm hand press his almost fiercely.

"Information ? What information ? What do you mean ?" came quickly.

Delighted with the impression he had made, pleased to still that deep sobbing, encouraged by the pressure of that warm soft hand, Western forgot all reserve, all thought but to interest her.

"I read that letter : the letter you gave me that evening on the Embankment," he said. "Will you forgive me ? I had no right to read it, I know, but you did not forbid me, and when I saw my father's writing, when I recognized the name of my father's oldest friend, I could not resist the temptation. Oh, can you forgive me ?"

"Yes, I forgive you ; but go on."

"I read the letter, and I could understand nothing of it, but——"

"Hush, hush, there is some one listening."

Both were silent, but she must have been mistaken, for they could hear no sound outside, and indeed it would have been difficult in any case for any one to overhear their conversation, as they spoke low, Western's companion especially keeping her voice dur-

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ing all the interview at a tone very little above a whisper.

"There is no one there," said Western, after a moment. "I could understand nothing of the letter," he continued, "but I was curious enough to look up an old diary of my father."

"A diary!"

"Yes, a diary of the last two years of his life. I was anxious to see if he made any mention of this old friend whose name I remember since a child."

"Yes, yes; and did he?"

"Several times. But what I wished to tell you was this. Perhaps it may be of some use to you to know——"

Western stopped suddenly. What was he about to say! The diary was his father's; there was some mystery in this affair with which his father's name was connected; this beautiful girl, she was weeping, was still a stranger.

Yet the little hand clasped his so eagerly, her warm breath fanned his cheek, he could hear the soft rise and fall of the lace about her bosom, and even in the darkness he could fancy her lovely eyes tear-stained and imploring turned wistfully to his.

He was a young man, only human after

all, and decidedly as he had stopped himself in his indiscreet confession he still hesitated, trying to discern some means of comforting his companion while yet retaining the small remnant of cautiousness and commonsense her proximity and distress had left him.

Whether it was because he held her hand, or because she was endowed with excessive quickness, he knew not, but it was soon evident that his companion had fathomed his state of mind.

She sighed heavily, and he felt her hand slowly withdrawn. She rose from her chair, and by the rustle of her dress as she moved he could tell that she was pacing up and down the room. How she did it without striking herself against the objects it contained he knew not.

"Mr. Western," she said abruptly; "I must apologize to you. It was not your fault that the letter was stolen from you. How could you have foreseen it? It was chivalrous of you to take charge of it at all, to give your name and address under circumstances so strange. You have done all which it could be expected a gentleman would do. And I must apologize for hoping for a moment—I beg your pardon, I should say—for letting you for a moment think I expected

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you to do more. As you say, your own name is connected with this—this affair. It would be cruel to suppose that you, a stranger—that you would discuss the private affairs of your family; that for a girl however lonely, however unhappy, you could——”

Her voice trembled and broke again and Western started to his feet.

“Lonely, unhappy,” the words and tone thrilled him. He remembered the lovely face which the momentary lifting of the veil had let him see, he recalled the deep low voice which had lingered in his ears ever since, and he knew that she was there in that room with him crushed by a grief which he and perhaps he alone could relieve.

He felt that he had said too much or too little. The mention of this diary must have roused her excitement to the highest point. His hesitation, natural as it was, could but have chilled her. What was he to do?

It seemed almost as if through the darkness she could read the conflicting emotions on his face, for he heard her, after standing motionless for a moment as if to listen for the effect of her speech, sigh heavily and move past him to the door.

“You go?” he said weakly.

"Yes. Thank you, Mr. Western, for all you have done, for all you would do, I am sure, were it in your power. And now let me release you from an interview which must have already tried your patience. I see that they have lighted the passage outside. May I beg one further favour from you? When you leave this room we shall never in all probability meet again, but should we do so—it is such a strange world—will you put it out of your power to recognize me? Will you, when you open this door, promise not to look round or attempt to see my face?"

"I have seen your lovely face, and I can never forget it," it was on Western's lips to say, but he kept the words back with an effort. His heart was sinking, and he felt strangely disturbed at her words, "We shall never meet again." And yet why should they? He had himself put it out of the range of probability. This letter which she had given him, and which might have been a link between them, he had lost; and this other revelation which he might make to her, this story of the diary, he dared not tell her. Yet he could swear she was as pure and honest as the day; he had seen her face though evidently she herself

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had forgotten it, and if he could not trust her, he would never believe in human nature again. And, thought Western, she at least had trusted him !

Yes, she had trusted him, and as he remembered that he suddenly made up his mind.

"I cannot let you go like this," he said firmly. "I cannot leave you, knowing that you are in trouble and distress, while there is a possibility that I have knowledge which may relieve your mind. This diary——"

She drew near to him with a single swift movement and again he felt the intoxication of her proximity, again he seemed to feel her dark eyes fixed on him, her soft breath fan his cheek.

"Yes, yes, the diary?" she murmured softly.

"You trusted me," Western continued quickly ; "I cannot forget that. This letter was of vital importance, for men fought for its possession ; yet you trusted me with it—me, a stranger. I will trust you also. I make but one stipulation—nay, I make two. You can read this diary. There are only a few passages which can have interest for you. Should there be anything in them which bears upon the subject of your troubles, and I think there is, may it bring you comfort ! But I ask that, whatever use you make of

your knowledge, you will remember that my father wrote the book. I know that he never did anything which could not bear the light of day, but—— Give me your hands."

He felt two soft palms placed on his, and seizing them he pressed them to his lips for a moment; then, taking the diary from his pocket, he clasped the small fingers round it.

"You are noble, generous, too generous," he heard in his ears. "But the other stipulation? Is it too hard?"

"Oh, I don't know," he murmured, dazzled and breathless with the touch of those soft palms which his lips had pressed. "I don't know. I only fear. The other stipulation is that I shall see—I mean that I shall *meet* you again.

"Meet me again?"

"Yes, oh, tell me that I may. Tell me that I may hope. Listen, you have forgotten, but I have seen your face already. It was beautiful, as lovely as your voice, as the touch of your hand. Tell me that it was not my last sight of such a vision, tell me we shall meet again."

He heard a low ripple of soft laughter, "Oh, you have seen my face already, and you think me lovely? How flattering! And yet I wish I could test your memory, for——"

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Western interrupted her quickly, "Let me break my word," he cried eagerly. "Let me light the room! Let me see you now!"

A little laugh tantalized him again. There was a moment's silence, and then he heard the door handle turn.

"Listen," said the voice. "You are very enterprising, but you have been generous and chivalrous. You have kept your implied pledge most nobly, and no one could have behaved better. You deserve a reward. But to get your reward you must follow out the commands which I am going to give you as faithfully as the first."

"I will do anything you bid me," cried Western.

"Well, listen. Take that chair again. Are you seated? Yes. Now I am going to leave you for a minute; oh, don't fear, only for a minute. My instructions, my commands are that you will sit there in that chair, and look nowhere but in front of you (there is a mirror there, but you can't see yourself, unfortunately); look nowhere but in front of you till I return. Now, will you obey?"

"Of course I will," he returned eagerly. "But, oh, please be quick."

Another little laugh answered him. He felt a hand pass light as a feather across his

hair ; he heard the handle of the door turn ; he saw a swift reflection of a ray of light in the mirror ; but he saw no more. And then he knew himself alone.

And she was going to return ! In a few moments he should see her again. He lost himself in speculations, delightful, tantalizing. He had kissed her hands in the darkness ; would she let him kiss them in the light ? She had passed her fingers through his hair ; would she blush when she returned ? How sweet her whispered words had sounded ! And she was coming back !

But she did not come. Moments passed, and then minutes ; minutes passed, and lengthened into longer spaces.

He heard a clock strike once, and then again. Good heavens ! half an hour ; more than half an hour, for she had already been some time gone when it had struck the hour. Lost in reverie, he had been seated there in the darkness for over thirty minutes then ? What did it mean ?

Unable to restrain himself he rose from his chair and paced the room. He had hardly crossed it once, when he struck against some heavy object, probably a table, and bit his lip to keep back an oath. She could see in the dark apparently, but he could not.

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He heard the clock strike again, three-quarters this time. Three-quarters of an hour! Good heavens! Three-quarters of an hour and she had said a minute!

Suddenly he heard a tap at the door and his heart bounded.

"Come in," he said eagerly.

The door opened cautiously, and to Western's horror he saw the face and the lace cap of a chamber-maid appear. "I beg your pardon, sir," she murmured, and retreated. Then, changing her mind, apparently, she entered again. "The gas, sir," she said, and she moved towards the chandelier, carrying a taper.

Western looked round the room. It was an ordinary small hotel sitting-room, but to his mind it still seemed redolent of her presence. His eyes turned to the maid, who he fancied eyed him curiously.

"Yes," he said quickly. "I suppose you had better light the gas. I—I—am expecting a—the lady back again in a moment."

The maid stared. "The lady back again, sir?" she said. "A dark lady? Oh, she ain't coming back again—at least so she said."

Western turned to her quickly: "Not coming back?"

"No, sir. At least I think not. She met me

on the stairs. At least a lady did, if it is the lady ; and she said to me to light the gas in 235 in half an hour if you—if the gentleman was still there. She said you wanted to sit in the dark for half an hour. She said she wasn't coming back."

"Not coming back ?"

"No, sir."

"Not coming back ! Light the gas in half an hour !" Western felt the blood rush to his cheeks. Then seeing the girl stare at him, he pulled himself together.

"Quite right," he said hastily. "Quite right, yes. But I think I will take a stroll, too."

The girl still stared curiously, or it was his fancy that she did, and drawing half a crown from his pocket he slipped it into her hand. "Yes, I will take a stroll, I think," he repeated ; and staggering past her, he descended the stairs.

Trying to wipe his face with his hat, and to put his handkerchief on his head, he walked blindly, confusedly, towards the hall of the hotel ; but apparently no one noticed his eccentric behaviour, and he quickly found himself in the street stamping his feet savagely on the cold slippery London pavement.

"Not coming back !" "Light the gas in half an hour !" Like to sit in the dark ! " What did it mean ? What did it mean ?

CHAPTER VI

THE BLACK TIN BOX

“**W**HAT did it mean ? ”

Western was to obtain complete enlightenment before many hours had passed.

He spent a restless and disturbed night—it would have been strange if he had not—and he awoke late. It was long past his usual hour when he descended at last to breakfast, and Mrs. Badger stared at him in astonishment as he took his seat before the bacon and kidneys of which he felt little enough desire to partake.

However he did his best (such cowards are single men) to do justice to the meal, lest Mrs. Badger should suspect him of dissipation the night before ; and he was well on his way through his second cup of coffee when he heard the front door bell ring violently, and then the sound of voices in the hall.

He expected no visitors, but the events of the past few days had prepared him for almost anything ; and when he heard his landlady's preliminary tap on the door, he put

down his knife and fork resignedly. If this was another Father Pink he was wasting his time. Having disposed of the letter and the diary he felt he had nothing else to lose. He should be interested to receive as many people as cared to approach him in reference to this mysterious affair, but this time, at least, he felt secure against deception. But he had a faint hope that if it *were* any one connected with the letter it might be Father Pink, for he had an account to settle with that gentleman.

It was not the worthy Father, however, as he saw when Mrs. Badger handed him the card she carried.

"Mr. G. Desilles."

Western did not know him.

"Who is he?" he asked Mrs. Badger.

"What does he want?"

"I don't know, sir. He asked to see you for a few minutes. A tall gentleman, rather red-haired."

"I don't know any tall red-haired gentleman," Western said, disconsolately. "Can't you put him off, Mrs. Badger?"

"Well, sir, I might; but I think it was rather particular business, from his tone. Perhaps you had better see him, sir. They're quite gentlefolk."

"They? Who?"

"There's a lady with him, Mr. Western, a young lady."

"A young lady? Good heavens! What's she like?" Western cried, a sudden idea shooting across his mind.

"Oh, a pretty young lady, sir, I think, though she's got her veil down. Tall like him, and——"

"Not red-haired, too?"

"Oh, no, sir. She's tall and dark. And yet she's like him."

"Tall and dark," Western's heart began to beat quick. Could it be—could it be *she* and was it all a mistake yesterday? Had she been unable to come back after all, and had she come now to—— But the man? Who was the red-haired man?

He sprang up from his chair, and hastily smoothed his hair, and arranged his tie before the glass. "Show them into the study, Mrs. Badger," he said quickly. "I will see them, certainly."

He waited while he heard footsteps ascend the stairs, and the study door open and close again, and then, a little more nervous than he could have wished, he crossed the passage and entered the study.

It was she! Yes, he knew her again in-

stantly, should have known her anywhere, and under any circumstances. She! Tall, dark and pale, lovelier than ever, standing there by his study window, her beautiful eyes fixed on his, her lips half open, her hands trembling a little, as his were trembling. He looked at them quickly—hands which he had kissed but a few hours before!

He watched for her to follow his glance, for a little smile, for a blush, for some sign, but none came. She only met his gaze quite calmly with a steady glance from her dark eyes, and then turned to the window again.

He looked at the man; and then for the first time he recognized him, and started violently. Yet why was he surprised after all? It was but natural: he might have guessed it at once from Mrs. Badger's description, so distinctly had his likeness, as well as hers, been imprinted on his brain. For the man who fronted him now, eagerly peering into his face, was the man of the mysterious duel in the fog, the victor, the big red-faced swordsman who had fled into the darkness pursuing ferociously his pale-featured antagonist. Yes, it was he; there was no doubt of it!

He started violently forward, as Western turned to him, and then at an almost

imperceptible glance from the young girl he drew back, making, Western could see, a strong effort to contain himself.

“ Mr. Western ? ” he asked quickly.

“ I am Mr. Western.”

“ You must forgive me for calling on you thus—a stranger, and at this hour, but—My name is Desilles—Gustave Desilles. This is my daughter, Miss Renée Desilles. Forgive me if I am abrupt, but you don’t know—you can’t understand— Yes, yes, Renée, I will be calm—*calm*, good heavens, calm ! I—but the other night, Mr. Western, my daughter tells me you saved her from a very terrible dilemma. You behaved most kindly and courteously in taking charge of a letter which—which was most precious to us ; which she would certainly have been robbed of if it had not been for you.”

“ I did nothing,” commenced Western.

“ My dear sir, you did everything. Those murdering scoundrels would have hesitated at nothing. You saw what they were capable of ! Luckily I had my sword-stick. You behaved like a true gentleman, Mr. Western. It only remains for us to thank you, my daughter and myself, and say that if we can—Eh, what’s that ? ”

He turned suddenly, at a little exclamation

from his daughter, who had been watching Western's face while he spoke. He looked from her to the young man quickly, and then, turning purple in the face, he put his hands to his collar and wrenched it open.

"Good God! Gone!" he gasped.

"I don't know how to apologize——" Western commenced feebly, avoiding the eyes of the young girl, which he felt were fixed on his, and anxiously watching the big, red-haired man, who, he feared, was going to have a fit, so much redder had his face become, and so wild were his eyes.

"It's all right," he said at last, hoarsely. "I'm better now. I might have known it! Gone, of course? Stolen? you have been robbed. Tell me how they did it; tell me what devilish tricks they played. But, of course, it was simple with you: you weren't prepared."

"I was not," said Western; "but I should have known better. I knew—how could I help it?—that the letter was an important one; and I should have taken care of it. But let me meet the rascal who robbed me, and I promise you you shall have complete revenge."

"Which of them was it? Who robbed you?"

"The villain who took the letter was, or called himself, Father Pink."

"Father Pink? A priest? A fat man?"

"Fat, yes, but he ran well."

"Ran? He could fly if he took it into his head. Father Pink? Worse and worse! Renée, we are done. We are ruined, my child. You will starve; we shall die in the gutter. And those villains, those cursed thieving villains, they will—— But let me get at them! Let me once get my hands round that fat old scoundrel's throat, and——D—— them! d—— them! But they haven't done with me yet! I'll hunt them through the world! I'll hunt them and I'll——"

"Father!"

The young girl's voice had an instantaneous effect, and the furious man, whose passion had grown terrible, stopped suddenly, and in an instant his features, naturally jovial, became calm again.

"You are right, Renée. I'll be calm, my child. It's you I'm thinking of after all. Mr. Western, forgive me! I don't know what you'll think of me, but if you knew what this meant to us, or at least to my girl here, you would sympathize with me, and hate that old fat rascal as much as I do."

"I bear him a grudge already," said Wes-

tern, smiling at his tone. "He robbed me in a most barefaced way."

"Tell me all about it."

Begging them to sit down, Western described his adventure with Father Pink, his appearance at his rooms, his sudden illness, and his disappearance with the letter.

Desilles, whose moods changed rapidly, roared with laughter at Western's description of Father Pink's waddle down the steps and the glimpse of the flying skirt which had disappeared so quickly round the corner.

"The rascal!" he cried, "the old fat rascal! I wish I had been there to see him. And, of course, you have heard nothing more of them, Mr. Western? They have got what they wanted, and, so far as you are concerned, I suppose they have been as quiet as mice?"

"Yes, until yesterday," said Western.

Both father and daughter turned to him quickly. "Yesterday?" said Desilles.

"Yesterday?" echoed the young girl.

Western stared at her, and hesitated. Was her father in ignorance of their interview? And then he suddenly turned pale. Taken by surprise by Desille's fury, dazzled as he was by his daughter's presence, he had entirely forgotten that he had told her yester-

day of the letter's loss, and, of course, she should have told him, though evidently she *hadn't*!

He caught her eye and waited for some sign, expecting that she would direct him what to do. But to his amazement her clear frank gaze said absolutely nothing, and he felt himself grow paler, while a cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Good heavens!" he gasped, involuntarily and sank into a chair. "Then it was not you yesterday?"

"Me? yesterday?" And the young girl's beautiful dark eyes stared at him in astonishment.

"Renée, yesterday?" asked Desilles, surprised.

Western bit his lip, silent, confused, completely overwhelmed.

What a fool, what a blind weak idiotic fool he had been! What had he done? And how could he tell these people this new proof of his folly?

But worse than all was the thought that for a moment he could have dreamed it was this girl he had met yesterday in the darkened room: this well-bred self-possessed girl, who met his gaze so calmly and frankly, but with such haughty indifference: this the girl whose

hands he had kissed, who had passed her fingers through his hair ! But then who was the other ? To whom had he given the diary ?

They must have noticed the expression on his face ; they must have read his thought ; for, for a moment, all three sat blankly staring at each other. Then Mr. Desilles broke the silence.

“ I don’t know how much we can expect you to tell us, Mr. Western, or what right I have to question you ; but I fear it is evident that you have been the victim of further schemes on the part of these people. I should have come to you sooner. I should have warned you at once. I am greatly to blame. But tell me at least this much. We have both noticed, we could not help doing so, the similarity between your name and the name of the writer of the letter you have been robbed of ? ”

“ It was my father,” said Western.

“ Your father ? ”

“ Yes, my father, Dr. Western. I read the letter. You must forgive me, but the envelope was in my father’s writing, and addressed to his oldest friend——”

“ How strange ! ”

“ The Count de Chevreux.”

Desilles frowned, his jovial red features

clouded, and his chin resting thoughtfully on his hands.

"I—we are connected with the Comte de Chevreux's family," he said slowly.

"Can you forgive me for reading the letter?" said Western, turning from him to Renée, who smiled.

"I did not ask you *not* to read it," she said kindly. "You saved it, or you tried to save it, for me. It was in your father's hand. It must all have seemed so strange to you; you must have been so surprised."

"Of course we forgive you," interrupted Desilles quickly. "Any one would have read the letter in your place. It was open, and how could you know who we were, or how we became possessed of it? But tell me—forgive my impatience; you cannot know how much this means to us—you spoke of yesterday, of something which occurred?"

"I will tell you," said Western; "but it is a terrible confession to make. I was so struck with this letter, and the apparent importance of the document, that I could not keep my mind from thinking of it, and at last I chanced to remember that somewhere or other I possessed an old diary of my father."

"A diary? Good heavens! I never thought of that."

"The diary of the last two years of his life, incompletely kept, unsatisfactory as regards the subject I was interested in, but containing sufficient to make me imagine that there might be some deep mystery, some vital interest to myself, possibly in its vague confessions."

"It mentioned de Chevreux then?"

"Yes."

"And the Comtesse? my sister? Did it mention her? Quick, quick tell me! Did it mention the—the child?"

"Yes, and in a very strange connection. But I must warn you to restrain yourself. If you have any hopes you must crush them, I fear. I have a terrible and humiliating confession to make——"

"Good God! You have been robbed of the diary too! They have got it!"

"I fear so," Western groaned; and he related his experience of the assignation, the darkened room, his weakness, and the trick played upon him. But he felt that he made a feeble story of it. Face to face with Miss Desilles, feeling her pure eyes fixed intently on his, how could he tell what he had fancied so madly in his excitement; how could he explain the real cause of his weakness in parting with his father's diary;

how could he tell them that it was the memory of her beauty imprinted on his heart : the fancy that it was she with whom he talked, who had wept so bitterly, and whom he had thought to comfort, that had brought about his downfall ? He felt he would rather die than let her know it : and meanwhile she must, if she so pleased, write him down an idiot—a veritable idiot.

But that other woman whose voice had been so soft, who had wept so naturally, who was she, then ? ”

Desilles and his daughter echoed his unspoken thoughts.

“ But who was she ? ” came simultaneously from their lips.

“ I know not,” said Western, disconsolately. “ I can ask at the Métropole, but it is quite certain I shall discover little of her, and I fear equally certain that the diary, owing to what you must think my stupendous folly, has gone to join the letter.”

“ Don’t blame yourself,” said Desilles, thoughtfully ; “ you have been cheated and robbed, but you don’t know the devilish ingenuity of these people, or the length to which they are prepared to go to obtain this—their object.”

“ I know something at least of their clever-

ness," said Western ; " but of their object I know nothing."

" Their object was a fortune of a hundred thousand pounds," returned Desilles gloomily—" my Renée's fortune. But I will tell you the story. Why should I not ? I can trust you ; I feel I can trust you, eh, Renée ? "

Western turned quickly to the young girl, but she was staring fixedly out of the window into the street below. As she looked, she gave a sudden cry, and turned to her father.

" Father ! father ! that man ! " she cried, and then, as if repenting suddenly, she stopped, and leaving the window, stepped quickly into the middle of the room. But Desilles had already caught the expression of her face, and with a spring had passed her, and reached the window.

" It is he, that scoundrel, that white-faced scoundrel ! " he cried. " But this time I will have him ! Let me go ! "

With a cry, Renée clung to him, and involuntarily Western ran to the window to follow the direction of their gaze.

He had scarcely time to see a tall thin young man pass the window, and to fancy that he recognized his features, when a second cry from Desilles attracted his attention.

" Let me go ! Let me go ! " he cried

furiously, trying to shake off the young girl who clung to him ; and with his free arm he dashed his hand through the glass of the window, shattering it to atoms. " Stop, you scoundrel, stop ! " he cried furiously to the young man, who only turned a pale startled face up to the sound, and hurried on.

The sight exasperated Desilles still further, and shaking his fist violently at the retreating form, he threw off the young girl and darted to the door. A moment later they heard the front door bang, and saw him running furiously down the street.

Miss Desilles watched him for a moment and then buried her face in her hands.

" He has gone ! " she murmured. " What can I do ? Those horrible people will hurt him ; oh, what can I do ? "

" Let me help you," said Western eagerly. " Let me run after him. I will stop him—I——"

She shook her head quickly, controlling herself with an effort, and recovering her calmness.

" You can do nothing," she said firmly. " See, they have gone ; they are out of sight already. It would be impossible to trace them. And why should you, Mr. Western ? There is danger in all this, I

fear ; my father is so rash. Ah, if he knew how I hate the thought of this money. But it is me he thinks of. But good-bye, Mr. Western, and thank you ; I must go."

"Oh, don't thank me," said Western quickly. "You make me ashamed of myself, for it seems to me I have done nothing but play into the hands of these enemies of yours since first I met you."

"You could not help yourself. You could not know. We should never have dragged you into it at all."

"But now that you have, let me at least attempt to redeem myself," said Western quickly, his heart beating fast as he met her eyes. "Let me help you, if I can. Use me as you will ; from this time, I promise you, these people shall gain no advantage from me, at least."

For a second the two stood looking at one another, both young, both handsome and in earnest ; then a faint colour rose to Miss Desilles' cheek, and she turned away. "We have asked enough from you Mr. Western," she said, almost coldly ; "or rather we have asked too much. Why should you concern yourself with the troubles of strangers !"

And then, as if she knew she had wounded him, she continued : "Why should you have

done so much already ? You behaved most chivalrously in taking charge of that letter. It was not your fault that you were robbed of it. I thank you again. And now again, Good-bye."

"But your father ! Where will you go ?" said Western. "At least let me escort you."

"There is no need. I shall go straight home, and there await my father. He will come back safe, I am sure, for I shall pray for him. No, no," as he attempted again to insist. "I cannot ask you to accompany me."

And she was gone.

Western heard her descend the stairs. He saw her tall graceful figure pass down the street, and repressed a violent impulse to follow her. He felt he had so many things to say to her, but he dared not risk offending her by following against her will ; and disconsolate, he returned to his room.

The shattered window was a living proof that she and her father had been there but a few minutes before, or he might have fancied it all a dream.

The shattered window ! And then he remembered the pale startled face which had looked up and met Desilles' furious gaze. If he was not mistaken, those features belonged to the swordsman whom Desilles

had defeated in the fog, and to whom he had taken such an instantaneous dislike. Were all the characters in this drama collecting round his house then?

And what could be the explanation of the mystery which had drawn them all together? A fortune of a hundred thousand pounds Desilles had declared to be the bait; what connection had his father had with that?

And then, an idea striking him, he took a volume from the bookshelf near him. It was an old treatise on French legal medicine which had belonged to his father, and which he had studied in desultory fashion at one time. He opened it and glanced through it, coming at length upon the following paragraph:—

“When, in the accouchement, both mother and child shall have succumbed, which of the two shall be supposed to have survived the other? This question, which we will now go into, may be of very great importance in the case where the father and mother have no other children of their marriage: because, if the child survive, he inherits from his mother, and transmits this succession to his father; but if he succumbs first, the succession of the mother reverts to her family.”

Both the Count de Chevreux and his second wife were French subjects still : neither had been naturalized. It was presumable therefore that had the Countess died before her infant child, her fortune, which Western knew to be considerable, would have passed to the Count, his father's friend ; had the child died first, the Countess' *dot* would have returned to her family. He recalled the letter and the diary with their conflicting statements. The letter, in which his father acknowledged being moved by the Count's request, stated that, according to his certificate, the Countess had died half an hour before her child. Then the money should have gone to the Count. The diary, written on his father's return to London before the funeral, stated that the child had predeceased its mother, and therefore the Countess' money should have returned to her family.

Which had happened ? Looking the facts boldly in the face, could he doubt ? He tried to twist and turn the knowledge that had come to him, to contrive other solutions ; to force himself to remember his father's integrity ; but relief would not come, and he could only sit there gazing gloomily into the fire and wondering what to do.

And then at last, rising from his chair, he

made his way upstairs again to the room where he had found the diary and where he kept all that remained to him of his father's papers. Surely there must be something among these which would tell him more of this mystery. The Count and his father had been correspondents for years ; the physician must have kept here and there a letter from his old friend, and if so, might it not bear upon this mystery ?

But he could find no letters. Though he went carefully through all the papers he could find, not a line did he discover from the Count de Chevreux, and he was about to give up the search in despair when his eyes turned to a small black tin box, which he had already overlooked once or twice.

It contained his mother's letters to his father, he knew ; letters which the physician, who adored his wife, had kept sacred since her death. But did it contain anything else ?

Apparently not, for he turned over the faded papers in vain until he reached the bottom of the box. And then he suddenly started, for, between two packets bound in discoloured ribbon, he saw an envelope which was not in the writing of the rest. It was addressed to his father at his house in Harley Street, and bore the Hillersley postmark.

He opened it with breathless interest, and read the contents, which ran as follows :—

“ M DEAR JOHN

“ By the time you receive this in all probability I shall exist no more. You warned me that if I had another of those attacks it would be the last. You gave me, what was it, a ‘ week ’ ? The week is up to-day. If I had no confidence in your great skill, my own heart would tell me I am to all intents and purposes a dead man as I write. Well, I am glad of it. There does not live on this earth, there has not lived a more miserable wretch than myself. I have lost my wife and child ; my son, my eldest son, has left me for years, and where he is, living or dead, I know not. I have borne all that ; perhaps I could bear it still. But what has eaten into my heart, what has made life a burden to me which I cannot support, *you know*. And yet for Victor’s sake who may not be dead, who I feel is not dead, still I cannot undo what is done. John, if I knew that my boy was alive, I would bear the shame and remorse which are killing me even faster than my disease. You will pity me, I know, for you think he is dead ; the world believes it. I cannot,

though so many years have passed. Forgive me, I cannot write as I would wish. I did not mean to go into this again ; I wrote only to say good-bye. Adieu, my old friend. My blessing again for all you have done for me. John, should I be right, should my poor Victor ever return, be good to him for my sake, and tell him this message which I give you for him : half the cause of all my misery, if he does not return, lies buried for ever with Marie in her grave.

“ HENRI.”

For a long time Western sat twisting this letter over and over in his fingers, and pondering its contents. But he could make nothing of it, nothing at least which seemed likely to be of use to him in the task which he had undertaken.

True, the Count spoke of shame ; true, he implied that the cause of those feelings would be known to Western's father ; but there was nothing to connect this letter with that of Western's father, and the veil of mystery which overhung the whole affair instead of being lifted seemed to Western only darker and more impenetrable still.

CHAPTER VII

A HOPELESS QUEST

WESTERN experienced anxiety when he had realized that he was being drawn involuntarily into some dark and mysterious intrigue. Now he began to regret that for the future he should be an object of so little interest to these people who had been brought so strangely into his life. For they had now all the information he could give them ; they were not likely to approach him again. Yet, find them he must. He felt that not alone his father's name but also the future of Renée Desilles was in their hands, and Renée Desilles he knew now he loved passionately.

Yes, he loved her, as it seemed to him he had loved her since that night when she had first appealed to him for help. That brief glimpse of her beauty in the fog had fascinated him. He had loved her in the strange circumstances of that darkened room ; and he had loved her when he had met her again,

and her eyes had told him she was too frank, too pure, ever to have been the heroine of an intrigue; when her broken words, her troubled leave-taking had told him her affection for her father, and her desire to renounce this fortune although she could not yield to because it meant so much to him.

But Miss Desilles had refused to allow Western to accompany her; she had said good-bye, and how was he to hope to see her again? No more than Father Pink had she any reason to approach him now. At what point was he to commence his researches; which thread would be the simplest to unravel? Western pondered for a time without deciding. As regards Miss Desilles and her father, or the pale-featured young man whom he had pursued, he had no clue to guide him; but it seemed to him that there were two people connected with his adventures whom it could not be impossible to trace, and these were the woman of the darkened room and Father Pink.

The first-named must have taken the room at the Métropole, and at least she had been seen and spoken to by people there. The second, Father Pink, had come to him with an introduction; surely Nevill would be able to put him on his track.

He commenced with the Hotel Métropole. A lady had taken the sitting-room where he had been received, also a bedroom, on the date of the assignation, saying that her luggage would arrive in the evening. Her luggage had not arrived ; she had changed her mind, paid for the rooms, and left. Her name was Smith and opinions differed as to her appearance. In the first place very few people had seen her at all ; only two recollected her. These were the hotel clerk and the chamber-maid to whom Western had given half-a-crown. The hotel clerk described her as rather short ; the chamber-maid as rather tall ; both called her slim and dark. Western could have added himself that her hands were small. That was really all. She had gone and had left no address. Western did not know how many Mrs. Smiths in London were slim and dark, but he considered it probable they were numerous, and he turned to Father Pink.

Here again he met with small success. Nevill was out of town, holiday-making, and would not be back for a month. He could only write to him ; and this he did, begging for particulars of Father Pink.

He had to wait several days for a reply and when it came it told him nothing.

"I don't know the worthy Father's address, old chap," the letter ran. "I was introduced to him at the 'Bon Compagnon' club by a man whose name I never can remember; and it wouldn't be any use if I could, for I recollect that he said he had been introduced to him himself at some public dinner that same night by some man whose name, in this case, I assure you, I haven't forgotten, for I never heard it. But Whiskers (the chap whose name I never remember) said he was the jolliest old priest possible, and so he was, for we made a night of it afterwards. I sent him on to you, first—because he asked me to; and secondly, because I knew you would like him. Didn't you? Sorry I can't tell you any more. I should say he hangs out at the 'Abbaye de Thelema,' or—where was that place where the old monks were always up to such larks?"

And so on.

There is no truer saying than that mystery is half the charm in woman, or than that opposition increases ardour. If Western was anxious to see Renée Desilles again on the day following her father's visit, he was desperate in a week, despairing in a fortnight; but no sign of her came.

In vain he wandered over London, in vain

he racked his brains for some suggestion. He merely wearied himself and discovered nothing. It seemed as if all the members of the mysterious intrigue had vanished and left no trace behind them ; and as time went on his strange adventures must at length fade from his mind, leaving only a half sad, half pleasant memory of a love that came to nothing, and an occasional disturbing recollection of some mystery affecting one dead but still dear to him ; a mystery which he could only fear must be better left unsolved.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PALE-FACED SWORDSMAN

IT was nearly a month after the events related in the preceding chapter when Western one evening again strolled along the Embankment.

In the earlier days of his wild search for Renée and her father he had often made his way thither. It had been the scene of his first adventure, the spot where he had first met her, and in his helplessness he had drifted thither in the hope that, as he had seen her and her father there on that occasion, they might live near by, or at least be in the habit of frequenting the thoroughfare.

He had given up the idea, as he had given up others which he had cherished, but still occasionally, almost involuntarily, he found himself pacing the broad pavement—sometimes at night, watching the thousand lights cast their reflections on the waters; sometimes at sunset, when the Embankment looks its best; sometimes in a fog, when all places look alike, and suicide seems the only refuge from

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a dreary world, and the river very convenient for the deed.

This was the sunset hour. The day had been fine and it was still clear and light. He had not long turned down from Villiers Street, and was sauntering along in the direction of the City, when the sight of two figures in front of him caused him to start.

They were those of a man and a woman, and both seemed familiar to him. The man's he was unable to place—he had his back to him—but the woman's! If it was not Renée Desilles he was mad, or was his mind so full of her still that he must fancy every woman's figure hers?

He quickened his pace, with his heart beating fast, and every step that brought him nearer to her made him more certain he was right.

At the corner of a street not twenty yards in front of him the couple halted, shook hands and parted, the man turning up the street towards the Strand, the woman continuing her walk along the Embankment.

Western gave the man a quick glance as he turned. It was the pale-featured swordsman, whom he had last seen in that neighbourhood under very different circumstances.

And Renée was in front of him!

She had not seen him but had walked quietly on, after nodding to her companion. Allowing the latter time to get out of hearing, Western hastened his pace and passed her.

Before he turned and met her face to face he had given her time to recognize him, and to recover herself ; yet as he looked into her eyes he saw that she was startled. He saw the quick colour flush her cheek, and he was glad to see it. It showed him that she was at least not indifferent to the meeting, but the expression in her eyes he could not analyse, though he remembered it, and drew hope from it afterwards.

“ Miss Desilles ! ”

“ You,” she said simply. “ Mr. Western ! how strange ! ”

“ Yet not really strange,” he said. “ For I at least hoped to see you, or rather I did not hope any longer. You remember that this is where we first met.”

She looked quickly round her, almost it struck Western as she had looked that night when she had trembled so at fancying some one near. “ How strange ! ” she murmured. “ Yes, it is almost the same spot.”

“ I think that is why I am here,” said Western. “ I wished so much to meet you

again, to hear how you—how your father got on that day. But now I think of it," he continued, "that was the very man he chased! That man who left you just now was the man—" He stopped, remembering himself, but he saw her turn suddenly pale, and for a moment she closed her eyes. Then she recovered, and met Western's eyes steadily.

"It was Mr. de Chevreux," she said, "the gentleman I am going to marry."

"Miss Desilles! Renée! That man!" he cried, overwhelmed.

All his heart was in the words. He was too startled, too horror-struck to measure his tones, or consider what he said; but there are moments when all conventions glide away, when a man and a woman see into each other's hearts, and the civilization which hides us from one another becomes a futile word. She did not even appear to notice anything strange in Western's manner or tone; it is doubtful if she thought of them at the time. Her face turned a shade more pale and became more serious, but she only bent her head.

"Yes, Mr. de Chevreux," she repeated.

Western clenched his hands and turned away, but a thought struck him, and he faced

her again, looking deep into her eyes. "De Chevreux?" he said, "de Chevreux? Ah, then I think I understand."

Again she seemed to read his thoughts, and this time a wave of colour flushed her face.

Western felt his heart suddenly bound at the sight. "Then it is the money," he said; "the money! the fortune!"

But this time, though she trembled, she would not yield, and drawing herself up, she met his eyes haughtily.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Western," she said very coldly, and, bowing slightly, she turned to go.

"It is the money," he repeated, "which causes you to do this! You don't love this man, you can't! Your father hates him, too. Yet now you tell me you are going to marry him."

She had stopped as if to listen to his words, but her back was turned to him, and he could not see her expression. Suddenly she faced him again.

"We have met but twice. You hardly even know my name," she said almost passionately. "What can it be to you what I do, or whom I marry?"

For a moment in his desperation, in the

over-excited condition into which this sudden meeting and this revelation had thrown him, he almost dared to venture all ; but he stopped himself in time. He could see that he had gone too far and that a word rashly spoken might end his hopes.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Desilles," he said. "I was wrong. I should not have spoken as I did. I was taken by surprise. I have no right to question what you do——"

"Oh, say no more," she interrupted him, half fiercely, half sadly. "I do not know that I myself have not given you the right. Let me judge no one. Let us part here. Good-bye, Mr. Western."

"Good-bye," said Western, and taking the hand which she extended to him, he bowed low over it. But before he had taken two steps he turned again.

"It is useless. I cannot," he said quickly ; "I cannot leave you thus. We might never meet again."

A faint smile at his despairing tone crossed her face. "Why should we ?" she said.

The smile emboldened him. "There is no reason, perhaps," he said. "But surely, without offending you, I may say that I would wish to be your friend. May I be your

friend, your sincere devoted friend ? Surely I might be of some use to you ! I think—but let me risk making you angry again. Miss Desilles, this Mr. de Chevreux is the son of the Count, my father's friend ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And has inherited his father's, that is to say, the Countess' fortune ? ”

“ Partly, yes.”

“ I cannot tell, nor do I ask, your connection with this fortune. Your father spoke of money ; you, yourself told me you did not want it ; you implied that it was only for your father's sake you thought of it at all, but still, for him, you had considered it.”

“ Well, Mr. Western ? ”

“ Miss Desilles, you know my strange connection with this affair, you have heard what I related to your father. I said that it was possible I had knowledge which you had not. Suppose, suppose that this money should not belong to this de Chevreux after all.”

“ What ! you know this too ? Oh, Mr. Western, it does not belong to him ! But tell me what you know. Ah, don't keep me in suspense ! You cannot guess what it might mean if we were sure of this, if we could prove it. It would save——”

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"It would save you from this marriage," said Western quickly. "Oh, Miss Desilles, you must let me speak. It is for your father's sake you are doing this. Let me beg you to hesitate before it is too late. Be angry; send me away; let me even never see you again; but hesitate before you take this step, for I swear to you that the money does not belong to this man. It is my shame to know it."

"Your shame? Ah, your father? Ah, yes, it was your father, who——But forgive me, it is useless to speak of that. The money is not Mr. de Chevreux's, though he possesses it; for it is ours."

"Yours!"

"My father was the Countess de Chevreux's brother and only relative."

"Ah, then the money is really yours," cried Western, with joy; "it is really yours."

"But can you prove it?"

Western turned pale, and, like a card castle, his hopes came tumbling down. Prove it? His father's letter, his father's diary were perhaps proofs, but where were they now? What had he done with them?

She saw his confusion and she smiled sadly. "You see, Mr. Western?" she said.

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Yes, he saw. He understood now the meaning of the adventures which had seemed so mysterious. He understood Gustave Desilles' fury, Father Pink's visit, and the affair of the darkened room. There had been a chance for Desilles and his daughter. That chance he, Western, had thrown away. And in doing so he had ruined not only Renée Desilles' prospects but his own hopes too, for he had cast her into the arms of de Chevreux. He could understand her father's passion for this money, which was his by right; and he could see that Desilles had taken the only step possible—an alliance with its possessors. But what a position was his, Western's! He loved this beautiful girl with all the force of his nature; yet his father's crime—for was it not a crime?—had robbed her of a fortune, and he, through his folly, had made the ruin irrevocable.

Crushed and ashamed, he dared not raise his eyes to hers.

"Miss Desilles," he murmured at length, "can you ever forgive me? But you cannot, impossible."

His dark eyes were bent on his. He said nay and pitied him.

"Can you blame me?" she said gently. "It is your fault; your father, too,

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probably did not know what he did. The old Count was his dearest friend—he——”

“ Oh, you are kind,” said Western, bitterly. “ But you cannot find excuses. It was a crime—there is no other word. My father was an honourable man ; I loved him, every one loved him ; but it was a crime he committed. And I—I through my folly——”

She interrupted him. “ There at least there are excuses,” she said gently ; “ you could not have known the value of that letter.”

Western thought of the diary. He had guessed the value of that at least, and he had given it away, thinking to comfort her by doing so — given it into her enemies’ hands.

As he looked at her sad face, as he realized all that this meant for her, he clenched his hands in despair ; but he quickly recovered his courage.

“ Miss Desilles,” he said firmly. “ Let me beg one favour, if indeed you have not too great a contempt for my father’s son to listen. Procrastinate ; do nothing rashly ; let me implore you to delay making any decision. My father and I have, it seems, done you all the harm it is possible to do ; give me a chance to repair it. I am a man, young

and strong. All my strength, all my intelligence, from this hour are devoted to undoing the wrong that we have done. Give me time, and I will succeed, I swear it ! These people, these enemies of yours are strong ; they are clever and determined ; but they have not the spur to urge them on which I shall have. They are secure now, and they will be idle while I am working. They will have other occupations, other thoughts, while I shall have but one—one single idea, one care, waking or sleeping: it will be to defeat them, to redeem myself in your eyes, to be able to come to you and say, ‘ I am ashamed to meet your eyes, but I am not so much ashamed, for the fortune which we robbed you of is yours for ever now, and—and you are free to marry whom you will.’

She had turned away her head while he spoke, and he could not see the expression of her face, but he fancied her bosom rose and fell more quickly, and he could see that her hands trembled.

“ Renée—Miss Desilles—tell me you will wait ! ” he cried.

She turned. “ It is better not,” she said ; “ it is better not. There is danger in this, danger for you. These people are unscrupulous, and why should you risk your life for us ?

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Oh, I know what you have said ; but I do not recognize your responsibility, Mr. Western. I think you wrong yourself. I assure you, if you wish to put it so, that I forgive you for anything which has happened or may happen, fully and entirely, but that I consider there is nothing to forgive. It is better that you should forget it all, better we should part here—have we not already said good-bye ?—and never meet again.”

“ Will you wait ? ” said Western.

For a moment their eyes met, and Miss Desilles lowered hers. Then, recovering herself, she smiled. “ Won’t you listen then ? ” she murmured.

“ Yes, I will listen to your answer. Will you wait ? Will you give me my chance ? Will you hesitate before you decide on this—this marriage ? ”

She shuddered at the word, but her eyes turned from side to side as if she meditated flight, and Western persisted.

“ Will you wait,” he said, “ or will you ruin my life too ? Will you let me carry through existence the shame of knowing that my father robbed you, and that I stood idly by and saw ruin completed ? Renée, will you wait ? ”

She hesitated still, and then, as if suddenly

deciding. "I will tell you to-morrow," she said.

"Where?"

"I—I will be here to-morrow at this time."

"But if you don't come? If you decide against me?"

"In any case I shall be here. Let me go now, Mr. Western. You have my word, I shall be here. Good-bye."

CHAPTER IX

RENÉE TELLS HER STORY

THE next day the appointed hour found Western pacing up and down the Embankment waiting eagerly for Renée Desilles.

Would she come ? and if she came, would she grant his request ? Would she delay and give him the chance he begged : the chance to redeem himself in her eyes, and defeat the people who had robbed both him and her ?

He had not long to wait. A little after the time he saw her coming towards him from the direction of Villiers Street.

She bowed gravely as she drew near. He saw that she was paler than usual, and that her face was rather set and determined ; but something in her expression nevertheless made him hopeful, and her first words more hopeful still.

“ Where shall we go to talk quietly, Mr. Western ? ” she said. “ I have much to say to you if you can spare the time. Shall we

go to the Temple Gardens? We shall be undisturbed there."

"Tell me first—I am so impatient—tell me, is your answer 'yes?' Will you wait? Ah, you will! I can see it in your face," cried Western.

She smiled. "Well, perhaps my answer is 'yes,'" she said. "Perhaps I will wait as you ask me to. We will see. But I have much to tell you first. Should I—should you really wish to help us, and it may be in your power, it is only right that you should know our history, the story of this fortune, and all that I can tell you of the people who now possess the money which should be my father's money, which he puts a far higher value on than I do, which they will never yield, as you may have guessed, without a terrible struggle. Will you come?"

"Certainly. Tell me what you will, but tell me nothing more than you wish," returned Western.

They made their way into the Temple Gardens, and finding a secluded spot they took an empty seat. The day was fine and, for the time of year, warm, and in ordinary circumstances it would not have been unpleasant to sit there under the trees for an hour, watching the sparrows picking and quarrelling

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and the few people who passed through the gardens. To Western the *tête-à-tête* seemed the most delightful prospect he could have conceived.

For the first time he was to have Renée entirely to himself; he was to gaze on her loveliness, to listen to her voice without fear of interruption.

For a moment after they had seated themselves she remained silent, her gaze bent upon the gravel, on which she traced vague figures with her sunshade. As Western watched her he thought he had never seen her look more lovely. She was exquisitely dressed, though very quietly, in a costume of smooth dark cloth, a long tight-fitting jacket displaying her slender graceful figure. On her dark head she wore, a little on one side, a Cavalier-shaped hat, while at her neck a Maltese-lace handkerchief served as the only foil to a costume which, though sombre, suited her to perfection.

She turned to Western at last with a little smile, either at his prolonged examination, which probably she was aware of, though she had not looked at him, or at some thoughts of her own.

“ Shall I tell you the story of this fortune ? ” she asked.

"If you will," replied Western.

"Well, I will begin. If I bore you, you must stop me. I will try to keep to what will interest you, and to what bears upon the question of the fortune only. And I will try to be as brief as I can. The Count de Chevreux, as you are probably aware, married twice. I know nothing of the first Countess save her name. She had one son, M. Victor de Chevreux, whom you have seen."

"The man you are going to m——; yes, I have seen him."

"The Count de Chevreux simply idolized Victor; but he was of a very violent temper, and they had constant quarrels. One day, when Monsieur Victor was eighteen, the Count struck him, and Victor left the house never to return while his father lived. The Count was wild with grief at the time, and afterwards became a changed man. Besides the love which he bore for his son, he recognized in him the heir to his name and title, and with the Count these last were almost a religion. But Victor de Chevreux never came back, and the first and only news which his father received concerning him was that he had been killed by natives while serving under Marchant near Fashoda.

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Some mysterious instinct must have told the Count that the news was false, for, while openly mourning for his son, he never really in his heart gave up the hope of seeing him again. However, he changed his mode of life from the moment the news came, and occupied himself with the other passion by which he was animated. The Count was a strong Royalist. I think this was the reason why he came to England. The re-establishment of the Monarchy was his ambition and almost his only thought.

“The Count spent a great part of his fortune upon the Cause ; his son Victor had also cost him much money ; and when he married my aunt, *en secondes noces*, he was almost a ruined man. My aunt, my father’s sister, also came of a Royalist family. The Desilles have always been Royalist. My grandfather came over in the suite of the Duc d’Orleans, and my father has lived most of his life in England, only going to France occasionally. That is why I am English. My aunt was very wealthy ; Monsieur de Chevreux was an old man and almost ruined, yet I think nevertheless that it was a love-match on both sides. The Count, I am sure, was devoted to the new Countess. My father, however, did not like the marriage, and it

was the cause of a rupture between him and my aunt. For that reason I saw very little, myself, of my aunt or the old Count.

“My aunt lived only a short time after her marriage. She died on the day that her baby son was born. That day must have been indeed a terrible one for Monsieur de Chevreux, for besides his devotion to his wife he passionately longed for an heir. Monsieur Victor was dead, and now he saw his wife and baby son taken from him. The blow must have been a crushing one.

“In addition to this, however, the Count had other troubles. He was greatly in debt. He had not, I suppose, anticipated the possibility of his wife dying; and while he knew that her fortune was at his disposal, he had no anxiety concerning money. My aunt’s wealth on her death was to return to her family, that is to say, to my father, failing an heir to the Count. On that terrible day, therefore, Monsieur de Chevreux saw himself bereft not only of his beloved wife and the son he had so longed for, but also he knew that his name was in danger of dishonour. The Countess’ money, returning to her family, would leave him a ruined man, and with Monsieur de Chevreux the honour of his name was everything.

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"The Countess did not leave an heir, Mr. Western, for she died after her infant son."

"I know it," said Western.

Miss Desilles nodded. "Yes, the letter and the diary must have told you that. In his extremity the Count turned to his greatest friend, your father, Dr. Western. It was he who was attending the Countess. I cannot say what arguments he used. Probably he deceived your father; possibly your father was told that my aunt left no near relatives, that there were no heirs to this money. At all events the physician was moved by the Count's distress and the knowledge that, unless he granted the unhappy man's request, ruin and dishonour would be added to the loss of wife and child. I know not how it was, but Dr. Western's certificate declared that the Countess died before her son, and that therefore the child inherited its mother's money. This child dying later, the money, of course, went finally to the Count.

"Monsieur de Chevreux got little happiness from it. The loss of his wife and child broke him utterly, and from that moment he became a different man. He retired from active life, even relaxing his exertions for the cause which had meant so much to him. He kept almost

entirely to his house ; saw no one, and gave himself up entirely to religious exercises.

“ It was at this time that he became acquainted with Father Pink.”

“ Father Pink ? What of him ? ” asked Western eagerly. “ That is the man who robbed me of the letter.”

“ Yes, I know. Unfortunately I can tell you very little about him. Where he comes from or who he is no one seems to know. He appeared one day at Hillersley, and there he remained. He is, I believe, a very clever and fascinating man, and he speedily obtained a very great influence over Monsieur de Chevreux.

“ What would have happened, or how he would have exerted this influence had time been given him, I know not ; for any plans which he may have had in view were spoiled by the sudden and serious illness of the old Count. So sudden and serious was this illness, indeed, that the neighbours had no sooner heard that he was ill than they were informed that he was dying. Two days after the first report he was dead.

“ My father, whose resentment had faded instantly in the presence of death, paid a visit to the Count while he still lingered, but

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he only succeeded in seeing Father Pink, and did not repeat the visit. The Count died, and almost on the day of the funeral came the news of the return of Monsieur Victor. It seemed that, while several members of his party had been murdered in Africa, he himself had escaped and returned to England, where he had been for some time previous to his father's death.

"Monsieur Victor, of course, inherited the Count's property, and it was not for some time that we received the letter which I handed to you that night in the fog. We have never discovered who sent it to us, but all seems to point to the Count's valet as the most likely person. He had, as we heard, quarrelled with Monsieur Victor and Father Pink; he, of course, had access to his master's papers during his lifetime, and he would be conversant enough with the family history to be aware of its importance. No doubt he did not consider it of sufficient value to sell, or his conscience did not permit him to go farther than what was probably merely an act of spite. In any case, the man disappeared after the Count's death and we have never heard more of him.

"This letter came as a complete surprise to my father, who had never for an instant

suspected anything of the truth, and indeed for a time he was inclined to attach but little importance to it. It was only after reading it again and again, and considering all the circumstances connected with it, that he came to the conclusion that—that——”

“That he had been defrauded,” said Western. “Oh, don’t hesitate.”

“He at once approached Monsieur Victor. You have seen my father, Mr. Western, but you have seen him under very disadvantageous circumstances. He is really the best-hearted of men. He is passionate, alas! too passionate; but only when terribly wronged. He felt that by all rights my aunt’s money was his, but he was also aware that Monsieur Victor had had a hard life; he felt that he could not claim the whole of a fortune which but for the merest accident—the difference of half an hour between two deaths—would have really belonged to the young man. Yet, on the other hand, the money was legally his—of that he was convinced—and he felt compelled to consider me and to remember that he was a poor man.

“Going to Victor, then, he explained the situation and suggested a compromise. Victor appeared to be much surprised at hearing of the letter my father had received,

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and at the construction my father had placed upon it. He did not, however, deny the gravity of the situation and, requesting time to consider the matter, made an appointment with my father for another day. Before that appointment could be kept, Mr. Western, two attempts were made to rob my father of the letter, and there was no doubt that in one at least of them Father Pink was concerned. My father, however, in spite of this, kept the appointment with Monsieur Victor, and tried all in his power to arrive at a friendly settlement. He refrained from showing that he connected him in any way with the attempts to rob him of the letter, and he used all the arguments he could conceive to persuade the young man to accept his proposals. It was useless. In the middle of the conversation Father Pink entered the room. He pooh-poohed my father's suggestions, laughed at his position, and so roused his anger that he left vowing he would press the matter to the uttermost extremity and retain every penny of the money, if the law should give him his rights.

"From that time we had not a moment's peace. Wherever we went, we knew ourselves watched; whatever we did, we felt that there were secret eyes upon our

actions ; and many times, in spite of our caution and my father's courage, our enemies nearly succeeded in possessing themselves of the letter which, poor proof as it was, was still the only one we had that the Countess's fortune was really ours.

“ But it was not alone the letter which they sought, and here is a strange part of my story. The Countess and the Count were Royalists, as I have said. The restoration of the Monarchy was their ambition, and to them it seemed certain that their dreams would be realized. They were familiar with all the intrigues and plans of their fellow-Royalists, and, whether rightly or wrongly, they believed that any day might see them called to join openly the cause which they now worked for in secret. It therefore seemed necessary to them to have a considerable sum of money upon which they could lay their hands at a moment's notice, and after much consideration they decided to invest a large amount in diamonds. These would be easily portable and could be disposed of wherever they might be called, while notes or securities might not, particularly in the upheaval which must follow such a crisis as they foresaw. I believe the sum which they thus disposed of exceeded ten thou-

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sand pounds; and the jewels the Count kept always near him.

“Although this fact was known to some in the Count’s household, no trace could be found of the diamonds after his death; and this was the cause of much perturbation to Monsieur Victor. It did not seem probable that the Count had disposed of the stones when the Countess died, and if he had done so some note would have been found of the fact; and yet there was no note, no reference of any kind, though the Count’s papers and the entire house were searched throughout.

“What or who first suggested to Monsieur Victor that it was my father who had obtained possession of the second fortune represented by these jewels, I know not; but it is certain that Monsieur Victor and Father Pink believed it, and from that moment our every movement was watched.

“It was at this time, Mr. Western, that I commenced to notice a change in my father. The constant anxiety, the feeling that secret foes were working against us, began to embitter him and to change his temper. He became irritable and morose and, worst of all, I saw grow up in him a fierce and terrible fever, a wild desire for this money which

formerly he had thought so little of. It was constantly in his mind ; he was always thinking of it, dreading that he might be robbed of the one small proof he possessed, and pondering some means by which he could obtain more evidence to convince the law of the justice of his claim. He even commenced, like Monsieur Victor and Father Pink, to wonder what could have become of all the wealth represented by those diamonds, and to believe that they might still be found."

"If they were, they would be his, as the Countess's money is also his?" asked Western thoughtfully.

"Naturally. They were part of the Countess's fortune. But they have never been found ; they never will be. How is it possible that they still exist? Where could they be?"

"Where could they be? Why, buried in Marie's grave." Western started as the words passed through his mind, rising almost unconsciously while his thoughts were far away. Yet, even as he pondered, suddenly he realized how vivid was the possibility which had suggested itself to him. Those words—the last in the Count's letter of farewell to his old friend—had sprung to his mind in reply to Miss Desilles' question, but they had

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only been the final link in a chain of thought which his mind had forged. Was it not probable, was it not even certain, that that sentence referred to these diamonds which were so valuable and of which all trace had been lost ?

The Count had always had an idea that some day the son whom he had so loved might return. He knew that any money he might leave behind him would belong by right to Desilles ; he must have felt that there was always a chance that the secret of the fraud he and Mr. Western had committed might be betrayed, and in that case his son would find himself worse than penniless, for he would also be responsible for the money which had gone to pay his father's debts. The Count had these jewels in his own possession, and could dispose of them as he wished ; Western's father was in his confidence, and would keep this secret as he had kept the other : why should he not bury these jewels in his wife's tomb, where they would either await his son's return or remain for ever with her to whom they had belonged ?

Yet if this reasoning was correct, why had the physician not taken measures to ensure the message reaching Victor de Chevreux's

ears should he ever return ? Western could only surmise that he had believed with the rest of the world in the young man's death, and, besides, his father had died suddenly, having hardly time to make a disposition of his own property.

Miss Desilles, who had been watching him wonderingly, broke the thread of his thoughts.

"What are you thinking of ?" she asked.

Western bit his lip, rather confused.

"Forgive me," he said ; "my thoughts were wandering. But continue, please. You were saying that your father too thought of these diamonds and wondered where they were."

"Alas ! yes, the idea became an obsession with him, and I am sure that had you not been the unconscious means of ending the situation something terrible must have happened. The desire for this wealth, combined with the continual persecution he was subjected to, drove him to a state bordering on insanity. These people became more openly daring—you saw the struggle in the fog—it needed but the merest accident to precipitate some tragedy.

"When, however, the letter was stolen, when they had apparently succeeded in discovering all it was possible for them to dis-

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cover, these people suddenly changed their tone. Monsieur Victor approached my father of his own accord and negotiations were opened up by them. I am glad to say that now at least Monsieur Victor showed every desire to behave well.

“I must tell you that it was at this time that we first heard how great Father Pink’s influence had been with Monsieur Victor. Monsieur Victor told us that it was the priest who had first urged him to recover the letter, and who had been the main cause of the trouble and anxiety we had experienced, and that it was he who had insisted that my father knew the secret of the missing diamonds, while Monsieur Victor had been as far as possible a restraining influence.

“While he succeeded in convincing my father of his good intentions and placating his anger, he did not succeed in putting himself entirely right in *my* eyes ; but he certainly put a better aspect upon his conduct, and at least there was from that time no reason to doubt that he meant well.

“We have seen a good deal of Monsieur Victor lately, Mr. Western, and my father has grown to like him. He—he admired me, and by my father’s wish it has been at length arranged that we shall be married. And why not ?

The marriage pleases my father ; there will be no question of the ownership of the Countess's fortune then, and my father will be able to live without anxiety the life which pleases him best, and——”

“ And you ? ” Western asked, watching her face. “ And you ? ”

She looked up for a moment. “ I, Mr. Western, I shall be Madame de Chevreux and——”

“ And *you* will be happy, too ? ”

“ I ? Ah, is any one really happy, Mr. Western, I wonder ? ”

“ I know not, but I can well imagine that I, at least, might be very happy.”

Her lips opened as if to ask the question which his sentence almost demanded, but she closed them again without speaking, and kept her eyes fixed on the ground.

“ You are not curious to know how ? ” said Western, smiling. “ But I will tell you nevertheless. I should be happy if I could come to you and say, ‘ I have undone the wrong my father did. I have the proofs that the the Countess's money is really yours. From this hour your father can live without anxiety the life which pleases him, and——’ ”

“ Go on, Mr. Western.”

“ And this marriage need never take place :

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this marriage which—ah, forgive me for saying it—I cannot but think a sacrifice ! ”

“ Mr. Western, you must not speak like that——”

“ A sacrifice ! I must repeat it. Everything tells me so—your looks, your voice, when you speak of this man, the tone I remember you used when you talked of him before. You are not so changeable as this implies.”

“ I am not changeable.”

“ Then be frank ; think what this marriage will mean ! ”

“ Surely I have been frank with you to-day, Mr. Western,” she said, attempting to avoid his eyes, and forcing herself to smile. “ I have told you all our story, all there is to tell.”

“ You have been so kind in meeting me here and talking to me as you have done, that I hope that you are going to grant my request : you imply that this marriage is not your wish—is it not so ? ”

“ To be frank then, Mr. Western, were some miracle to happen ; were my father to become suddenly rich, or were this miserable fortune to be proved lawfully ours—probably I ——”

“ Yes, yes ? ”

"Probably I should remain Miss Renée Desilles. But, Mr. Western, miracles don't happen nowadays."

"I could make even miracles happen, I think, if you would only give me the hope that they would please you," said Western quickly. "Ah, Renée, listen!"

"Mr. Western, I must go now."

"But let me speak."

"You must not. Remember I am Monsieur de Chevreux's fiancée, and that even if I had my own desires, even a distaste for this marriage, I could not break my father's heart."

"You confess then that——"

"I confess nothing; I say nothing. Ah, Mr. Western, will you make me regret I came?"

"No, for in coming you have saved yourself. You have given me permission to work for you, and I will save you from this marriage—I swear it. You smile; do you doubt it?"

"Not your wish, but your power. You don't know Father Pink; both he and Monsieur Victor will be against you. Oh, I wish it were not so, Mr. Western. But listen to me—give up this idea; attempt nothing."

"And never see you again? Would you

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care ? Renée, tell me it is not quite hopeless. Tell me if——”

She rose quickly. “Mr. Western, I must go. I must not listen to you any longer. This world, I am afraid, is not the place you think it. There are no ‘ifs’ in life that it is wise or possible to consider ; there is only the straight line of duty. Thank you for your kindness and for what I know you would do for me and my father.”

“For what I will do ; for at least you have given me permission to try.”

“I have advised you not.”

“But the advice implies permission to act should the advice not be accepted. Oh, even if you don’t give me permission, I have almost the courage to disobey you.”

“Then it is useless for me to speak,” said Miss Desilles, smiling half-sadly.

“Yes,” said Western quickly, “quite. I am content. And now one more favour. Tell me where you live ?”

“You would—oh, no ; I cannot. It is better not. Father Pink knows you and——”

“Don’t be afraid. I shall not come without your permission ; I may never even come at all unless I can come with good news. But to do anything it is necessary for me to know your address. Will you give it me ?”

Miss Desilles held out her hand. " It is 12, Gaunt Street," she said quickly. " And now good-bye ! "

Western bent for a second over the slim fingers he clasped in his, but almost before he could touch them with his lips they were withdrawn, and he found himself alone.

CHAPTER X

THE PROCESS-SERVER

WESTERN returned home after his meeting with Renée Desilles with his heart beating high. He had something to work for now : something he could do for her. She had given him the chance to free her from this hateful marriage ; had not her looks given him hope of another and sweeter chance still ?

Yet that the task before him was no easy one he had to confess. The indisputable proofs that the old Count's money really belonged to the Desilles he had had in his possession, and he had thrown them away. These people who were working against Renée and her father, and working so successfully, not only held the money, but they held the proofs as well. Was it likely that they would give up either without a deadly struggle ? And in what other direction could Western turn ? Yet his heart lightened as he realized that he had at least one strong point in his favour. Renée's words had—

unless he was much mistaken—put him into a secret which de Chevreux and Father Pink would have given much to know : the hiding-place of the old Count's jewels. Almost as surely as that he had just said farewell to Renée he felt that these were now lying in the Countess's grave ; and there alone was a fortune. Ten thousand pounds ? Would it be enough to satisfy Desilles and save Renée from that marriage ? Who could say ? But at least their possession must prove a tremendous advantage in the struggle.

His experience of the enemies he was now to encounter had given Western a wholesome respect for their ability, and he quickly made up his mind that there was no time to lose if he were to make any use of the advantage he had.

“ I must start work at once,” he thought, as he entered his rooms ; “ and the first thing is to see whether my poor father left any other traces of this affair behind.”

But an hour's search through the dead physician's papers left him no more enlightened than before. Not another word could he find that bore upon the mystery of the Count's money ; and, unwillingly, he resigned himself to the fact.

“ Then the next thing,” he thought, “ is

to go down to Hillersley myself. Thank goodness, I am not in want of money. I have enough to take me to the other end of the world if necessary. But I shan't need to go so far as that, I hope. Where was 'Marie' buried, I wonder? At Hillersley, I expect. At all events I shall find out there."

Not only was Western not in want of money, as he had said, but also he was independent, and it did not take him long to make his preparations for the journey. A word to Mrs. Badger, a few things thrown into a bag, and he was already on his way to the station. Half an hour later and he was in the train speeding on his way to Worcester-shire. He had just caught a train, and he took the fact as a good omen for the result of his journey. He was, however, to have doubts upon the subject before many hours had passed.

* * * * *

"Hillersley! Hillersley!" he heard the hoarse voice of the porter calling the name, and woke from dreams of Renée and a smiling future to gaze out at the little wayside station with curious eyes.

The place looked a small one, for there were but few houses in sight, and the plat-

form was almost deserted. Western caught sight however of an inn displaying its sign-board across the road from the line, and, descending, he took his bag and started towards it.

It was a modest little place enough, but it seemed clean, and Western, after a few moments' conversation with the proprietor, soon found himself in possession of a bedroom at what seemed to him a ridiculously small price.

"There's the coffee-room, sir," said his host to him as he descended after a wash. "But I daresay you would rather take your meals by yourself. If so, you can have them served in the little sitting-room at the back."

"Have you any other guests, then?" asked Western. "Well, sir, one; but he's not what I might call exactly your class, sir."

Western laughed. "The question of class is a wide one," he said, good-humouredly. "Don't bother about me. Unless your other guest is suffering from something catching we shall get on very well."

"Something catching, sir? Ha, ha! Excuse me, sir, but that's a good one, that is. Something catching! Oh, no, sir, it ain't that. He ain't suffering from anything catching."

Western stared, rather amazed. "I don't understand," he said at last.

"Well, sir, you see," said the host, drawing near to him, and lowering his voice, "to tell you the truth he's a process-server. That's why I laughed, and somebody's going to catch something, though not what you meant, sir, ha, ha! But some gentlemen wouldn't care to sit down with one of that sort, and perhaps he wouldn't wish for me to tell you, sir; for they has their feelings, like any one else. So perhaps if you've no objection, sir, you won't mention it."

"I won't mention you told me," replied Western, smiling; "and as I have no reason, fortunately, to dislike his class, perhaps you will show me into the room and tell me when that very good dinner which I smell cooking will be ready."

"It won't be ten minutes, sir," said the host, apparently relieved at Western's urbanity, and, opening the coffee-room door, he ushered the young man inside.

A dismal-looking man in shabby black looked up at Western's entrance and bowed solemnly. He was a man of about forty, with a hard square jaw, and a ruminating but nevertheless rather keen gaze. Western concluded that this apparent contradiction

came from the fact that he squinted strongly, and while one of his eyes pondered solemnly, the other roved vivaciously.

Western had come down to Hillersley to seek information, and for this he would in all probability have to rely a good deal on chance, he therefore returned the process-server's salutation courteously, and the two were soon seated at table.

Western noticed that his companion had unfortunately turned the ruminating eye towards himself, and seemed little inclined for conversation. "If it had been the other eye, I am sure he would have talked," he thought, after a few vain attempts. "I wonder what subject interests a process-server. It certainly won't do to start on writs."

"May I offer you a drink?" he said at last, in despair, passing the bottle of burgundy which he had ordered for the "good of the house."

The dismal man flashed round his roving eye for a moment and hesitated.

"You aren't staying in the house, I suppose, sir?" he said.

"Yes, I am staying here," returned Western, rather surprised.

"I thought you might be going up to Hillersley House," said his companion.

"No," replied Western, still at a loss.

"But perhaps you happen to know the folk there?" continued the man.

"Not at all," returned Western. "I know no one in this neighbourhood."

"Then, thank you, sir, I'll have a drink with you with pleasure." And he took the bottle.

Western stared, interested. And the man's roving eye caught his look. "You see, sir," he said at last, "I never mix business and pleasure. I have some business down here, and for aught I know you might have been connected with the folk I have to do with. And in that case you might have rounded on me when next we met."

"Not at all," said Western, rather inconsequently. "But may I ask what your business is?"

"I hope the landlord is not listening," he thought.

The man's ruminating eye turned away and the roving one took its place.

"I'm a process-server, sir," he said. "I've had better trades in my time, and I've had worse, but not often. But one has to do what one can in this world, sir. Are you married, sir?"

"No."

"Ah, I was. My wife ran away from me, sir, and that's why I keep on at this job. It keeps me moving about, you see, sir; I'm always at some fresh place."

"Do you hope you will find her, then?" asked Western, sympathetically.

"No, I hope I won't, sir."

The unexpectedness of the reply, and its determination, made Western laugh and the man went on. "You see, sir, some day she'll come back again, trust her; and I want to be out on that occasion."

He lapsed into monosyllables after this, and Western, rising from the table, strolled to the window and looked across to the station.

A train had just come in and as he watched its passengers descend he started and drew back a little from the window. A man leaving one of the rear carriages had walked across the platform and, turning into the road, was approaching the inn. Something in his appearance from the first moment had struck Western, but as the newcomer drew nearer he felt his heart beat fast. Unless he was mistaken this traveller was the pale young man of the struggle in the fog, de Chevreux himself; and he wondered he had never considered the possibility of such a *rencontre* before. De Chevreux had

inherited the old Count's money ; of course, he was living at Hillersley. What more natural ? But hardly anything could have been more disconcerting at the moment. Whether de Chevreux knew him by sight he could not say, but it was certain that Father Pink did. Father Pink and de Chevreux were acting together, according to Renée, therefore at any moment the former gentleman might appear ; nay, he might even now be here. And with that pleasant fat person's keen intellect directed on his plans, Western realized that he would soon be in danger. What was he to do ? He could only wonder vaguely and, hidden behind the blinds, watch this man's approach.

Was he coming to the inn and, if so, would he enter the coffee-room ? Western wondered breathlessly ; and then he suddenly became aware that he was not the only person watching from the room. A breath on his cheek, the light brushing of a sleeve against his made him turn, and he saw that the dismal man was looking over his shoulder into the street.

"He's not coming here, sir. I thought he was at first, but he ain't. Oh, well, it will do later," he continued, almost to himself.

Western stared at him. "Do you mean to say you have a—that your business was with that gentleman?" he said.

The quick eye flashed on him for a moment. "I understood you did not know the gent, sir. That's the owner of the house at Hillersley."

"Yes, but when you asked me I had not realized that," answered Western. "And even then I can say that I do not know that gentleman, though I know of him."

The process-server nodded his head slowly. "Oh, he's a beauty, sir," he said; "but he's nothing to Father Pink."

Western held his breath. "Father Pink?" he said. "Is he here now?"

"Oh, yes, he's here. He's always here. He's more here than the other. And together they are a nice couple. I had some bother with them last time. I shall have more this. Perhaps you think I should keep my mouth shut, sir, but I can tell you there ain't any one down here that don't know what I've come for and what I've been here for before. The folk here haven't much opinion of them, and if I were you, sir, if you'll excuse me, I'd give them a wide berth."

"Thanks," said Western quietly; "I dare say your advice is sound."

The dismal man nodded and left the room and Western stood at the window pondering over his words.

There was no doubt that the news he had heard was bad. The appearance of de Chevreux and Father Pink on the scene of his inquiries must be dangerous, possibly fatal to his success. Then, also, it was evident that these men were in financial straits, and probably desperate ; and if at any moment chance should put them on to the track of the Countess's jewels, he might be too late to save Renée. But was it possible that de Chevreux had already squandered the old Count's money? If so, it was evident that the marriage with Renée had become of vital importance to him, for once married to her the vanished jewels would, if discovered, be in any case at his disposal, and they could not have disappeared for ever ; while, on the other hand, should the Desilles ever succeed in proving their claim to the estate, de Chevreux would have merely his wife and father-in-law to deal with. Clearly, Western had no time to lose and he realized the fact with a thrill.

It was growing dark as he reached the end of his deliberations, the dismal man had disappeared and the little coffee-room looked

rather cheerless. Western determined to take a stroll round the village. He soon discovered that this latter was not much more exciting than the inn, however. He had promenaded the main street from end to end in five minutes, and when he had looked at the little Church he felt that he had exhausted the subject.

"I wonder if 'Marie' lies buried there!" he thought, standing for a moment and looking over the low stone wall into the dimness of the churchyard. It was nearly dark now, and he could only faintly catch sight of a tombstone here and there, but he fancied he could still contrive to read the inscriptions and he clambered over to the other side.

He met with no success, however; either owing to the darkness, or because it was indeed not there, he could find no trace of the name of de Chevreux, and he made his way from the graveyard.

The gate by which he went out gave on to another road, a quiet lane running between trees, and he turned along it, chancing the direction he took.

He had strolled thus for half an hour or so when he became aware that the darkness was increasing rapidly, and that unless he wished to risk losing his way he had better

be turning home. He was about to stop when he suddenly became aware that there was some one else behind him in the lane and he walked on listening, but without turning his head.

A few moments convinced him of the truth of his suspicions. Though the footstep behind him was a light and apparently exceedingly cautious one, it was nevertheless present, and struck unpleasantly on Western's ear. The sensation of being dogged at night in a quiet country lane is never a very comfortable one, and in Western's case he felt it to be particularly suspicious. Both de Chevreux and Father Pink were in the neighbourhood ; could it be that they already knew of his arrival and suspected his motives ? It was possible, for news travels quickly in a small country place.

He walked on a few yards and then turned suddenly. It was too dark to see far ahead, but he was sure that the quiet footstep ceased for a moment, and then started again as he commenced to step forward ; but this time it moved away from him in front. Annoyed, he hastened a little, but the footstep hastened too. " There is no question of it," he thought, and he decided to discover who this unknown pursuer might be. " If it comes to running,

"I can run too," he thought, and he began to do so.

Western could run, as he had said, but so apparently could his unknown companion, and when he couldn't run he twisted, so that while in a few minutes Western had twice nearly succeeded in obtaining a glimpse of him, he, on the other hand, had twice nearly succeeded in eluding Western altogether by flinging himself into the hedge and lying still as a startled hare. But Western's wind was still good, while he could hear his quarry blowing heavily and he held on his way without relaxing speed.

And he had cause to congratulate himself on his determination, for in a short time the flagging steps in front warned him that the unknown was nearly done, and a few steps farther he appeared in view. And then Western started violently, for, dark as it was, he recognized the wobbling figure that had led him such a chase. If it was not Father Pink he felt that he could never trust his eyes again and he made a wild leap forward.

The unknown tried to respond, but Western's hand was almost upon him, and with a sudden cry he flung himself upon his knees. "Spare my life and take my money, my

poor man!" he cried. "To run so hard you must want it more than I. Sure I'm done, but don't kill me, though I couldn't move another step if you did. Why, hullo!—what's this? Why, it's my young friend the doctor's son! My boy, but I'm glad to see you, though to be sure you mightn't think it by the way I ran from you. Bless my soul, and I thought you were a footpad at the very least!"

Western stared at him, suddenly dumbfounded, the worthy father's speech paralysing him for a moment. And the latter, looking at him keenly, continued:—

"And here was I running away from you as if my old legs had any chance against your young ones; but you spared me, my boy, out of your kind heart, of course, or I'd never have got so far. It's little running I'm fit for. And that's a reminder that I ran away from you on our last meeting, and forgot to tell you where to come to dinner. I never thought of it till a week later, and I wondered why you didn't come; and when I minded that I had never told you where to come to, thinks I, well, he'll be glad of the excuse for not troubling a poor old man; and so I left it at that. And when you come I run away from you after all, ha, ha! But you don't bear any malice, my boy, do you?"

"For what?" said Western, slowly.

Father Pink gave him a quick glance, though the smile never left his jovial red face. "Well, for not telling you where to find me," he said. "For sure it isn't for running away from you to-night you could bear any malice, for by the snakes that aren't in Ireland I didn't know it was you until I saw your handsome face. But to show you forgive me, you must have that dinner with me yet, my boy. I am not in my own house down here, but I am in what's next best, the house of a good friend. And my friends will be his. He's a fine young fellow, the Count de Chevreux, and he'll give you, for my sake, as good a welcome and a better dinner than I could have done. Will you come, my boy? Are you fond of music?"

It had been rather difficult for Western to think while Father Pink poured forth this rapid stream of speech, but he had contrived to do so nevertheless, and the result of his cogitations was that he determined to take the worthy gentleman at his word and to turn his own weapons against him. After all, he thought, although he had no doubt that it was Father Pink who had robbed him of the letter, and helped to rob him of the diary, he had no sort of proof that this was

the fact. On the other hand, these people now were aware of his presence at Hillersley and would watch him in any case. He might just as well accept this invitation and feign innocence as quarrel openly with them and give the additional help which frank hostility would afford them.

"I am very fond of music; yes," he said quietly.

"Ah, then I'll promise you a treat which you won't get every day, my boy. Lucretia shall sing to you, and it's not every one I allow her to do that for. But will you come? To-morrow night? At eight?"

"I shall be pleased," replied Western, fully resolved. "But where?"

"Ha, ha! You're not going to get caught again, are you? Where? Why, to Hillersley House, over the fields there. But every one will tell you where Hillersley House is. But where are you staying?"

"I am at the inn for a little while."

"At the inn? Then our way lies together for half a mile or so. We'll have a chat as we go, for I suppose you have had enough of walking, or rather running, ha, ha! I promise you I have."

And slipping his arm confidentially inside Western's Father Pink turned towards home.

It was the worthy priest who did most of the conversation, and when they parted at the turning to the village Western could congratulate himself that the former had succeeded in doing very little pumping. And he smiled as he turned his head and watched the massive figure padding softly into the darkness. He felt that he had lost nothing by Father Pink's attempt; he had rather gained, in fact; for he had received the invitation to Hillersley, and it only depended on himself to make use of the opportunity offered him to become better acquainted with these people and their surroundings. In accepting their hospitality with hostile motives in his heart he felt no scruples, for he felt they had had none, nor would have any with him. And Renée's future depended on him from now. "I wonder if that old rascal has really gone home?" he thought. "I think it would not do any harm to look."

He waited a moment or two and then followed Father Pink noiselessly into the darkness.

He could hear the soft pad-pad of the priest's footsteps before him, though he could see nothing of him and he had no difficulty in keeping up with him.

It was evident that Father Pink was going

home, or at all events that he had no intention of shadowing Western again, for his step was quick and decided ; but nevertheless the young man continued to follow, some feeling, partly instinct, partly curiosity, making him do so.

“ These must be the grounds of Hillersley House,” thought Western at last, as the priest turned off the main road, past a small lodge and up an avenue. “ I think I will leave him here. At all events I know my way now for to-morrow.”

But even as he thought a shout like a cry for help came from the distance and he stood listening. Again the cry was repeated—this time there could be no doubt of its meaning—and Western without a moment’s hesitation darted towards the sound.

Father Pink had apparently disappeared, for he saw no more of him ; but as he drew nearer the sound grew louder and was replaced by a hurried scuffling noise. It was evident that some violent struggle was going on not far ahead and Western hastened his pace lest he should arrive too late to be of any help to the person who had called so loudly.

“ Hold on, I am coming ! ” he cried, and then stopped suddenly, for, turning a corner, he came abruptly upon the scene of the struggle.

Before him, upon a lawn, lighted by a torch which a fourth man held, three figures fought viciously. For a second Western watched in doubt, and then, seeing that two of them were evidently attacking one and that this one was getting the worst of it, he stepped forward. As he did so a quick flash of the torch showed him that the underneath man was his companion of the inn, the process-server, while the torch-bearer was no other than the pale young man, de Chevreux.

He made his decision instantly. With a spring he reached de Chevreux before the latter could see him coming, and striking the torch from his hand, left them in darkness. Then guided by the sound of the struggle he darted to the dismal-looking man's assistance. He was fighting silently and doggedly to hold his own against his two assailants, but he was being rapidly overpowered, and Western felt that he had only arrived in time, and that even now should de Chevreux join the fray things might be serious. But he gave the torch-bearer no time to recover from his surprise. Groping in the darkness, he caught the collar of the uppermost man and, choking him, dragged him aside. "Go!" he said roughly and helped him on his road with a hearty kick. Then

he turned to the other, but the process-server was equal to one enemy and, between his attentions and the surprise of his comrade's sudden disappearance, this latter relaxed his efforts and, springing to his feet, darted aside.

Western saw however that he could not rely too long on the advantage of the sudden surprise and, seizing the process-server by his sleeve, the first thing he grasped in the darkness, he whispered, "Back to the inn, quick! there are three of them." And drawing the astonished man with him, he turned and fled.

For a moment the enemy hesitated, but that moment was sufficient for Western and his companion to turn the corner of the shrubbery, and when the pursuit at length commenced they had reached the safety of the trees that bordered the avenue. In a few seconds more they were out on the road and well on their way to the inn.

When all the sounds had at length died away his companion turned to Western. "Thank you, sir," he said. "You are a gentleman. You have saved me from a month in hospital, if not worse. They meant doing for me, those beauties, while their master held the light for them. There ain't

many gentlemen would have come to my help like that and I shan't forget it."

"Nonsense," said Western, lightly. "Why, any one would have done the same. It was a cowardly attack."

"Well, you see, sir, ours is not a very popular trade, and some people would have said 'serve you right.' But popular or not, this is the first time I've been in as tight a place as that. I don't think they would stop at murder, any of the lot of them, foreigners as they are; Frenchmen I guess. But it ain't so much them, I blame, as their master, the man that hounded them on. Did you see him, sir?"

"Yes, I saw him," returned Western. "He was holding the torch and I knocked it out of his hand. But why did they attack you? Your business may not be popular, as you say, but I suppose this is rather exceptional treatment, to say the least of it, isn't it?"

The dismal man nodded. "Well, sir, I'm not at all sure they knew who I was. I think they would have set on any one who came near the place the same. But I had a bit of a barney with one of them, and then they started. It was too dark at first for me to see, and afterwards things were too mixed up; but I had an idea I had

met one of them before when I was in another kind of trade. But I thank you again, sir—here we are at the inn—and if I can ever return your kindness, why, you have only got to let me know. May I ask if you are staying long in this neighbourhood, sir ? ”

“ I shall be here some days, probably,” returned Western ; “ and you ? ”

“ Some days, too, very likely, sir. I want to see something more of that gentleman who held the torch, before I leave.”

As they parted in the passage of the inn, Western felt that he had passed a not uneventful day. He had made one firm friend, he felt, in Hillersley, and he had come across both Father Pink and de Chevreux. He wondered if the latter had seen who had knocked the torch from his hand so uncere- moniously. It had been accomplished so deftly that he hardly thought it probable, but the mere chance of it gave him cause for anxiety, as in that case his acceptance of Father Pink’s overtures would be wasted.

Deciding at last that it was useless to worry over the question, he determined to turn up to dinner at the appointed hour on the morrow, even if in doing so he were courting the process-server’s fate ; and he sought his room.

CHAPTER XI

LUCRETIA

THE next morning Western spent in making a few discreet inquiries in the village, without approaching too near to Hillersley House. He could learn nothing however to guide him as to the whereabouts of the Countess de Chevreux's burial-place; and it was not till the afternoon, after a great deal of research, that he was directed to the house of an old servant of the family, who had retired from service and was living at some distance from the village.

He found the place easily enough, a pretty little cottage off the main road, and stood for a few moments before he knocked at the door, pondering the best way to broach the subject of his inquiries.

At last he noticed a little printed placard announcing that seed potatoes were to be sold cheap, and deciding to order some—a ton if necessary—he tapped at the door.

It was opened by an old woman who might have stepped straight out of a Brittany

farmhouse, and who bore out her appearance by speaking with a broad French accent when inquiring his business. Her keen old eyes took in Western's appearance, but her features brightened when he stated his object in coming and, to his relief, she gave the conversation a lead at once in the way he wished it to go.

"You shall have some of my master the old Count's own special stock. They came once from the country I was born in, for I'm not English, as the gentleman can perhaps see. But my master had them sent over from his estate in Bretagne, and they grow all the better for the change of soil, as potatoes always do, as I dare say the gentleman knows. Perhaps you will give yourself the trouble of coming round to the back where I keep them in my little shed, sir, and you can see if you care for them."

Western nodded and they set forth. "When you talk of the old Count, do you mean the Count de Chevreux?" he asked.

"Surely, sir. But do you know the family, sir?" asked the old woman, peering anxiously up at him; "are you a friend of theirs?"

"No, I merely have heard of them," returned Western.

"Ah, every one has done that, sir, for it

is a great family, or rather it was, sir, it was. Things are not what they were ; alas ! things are not what they were. The Count's dead now"—the old woman crossed herself—" and the Countess too : ah, she was an angel."

" Ah, the Countess is dead, too, is she ? " said Western. " Did she also die away from France ? "

" Yes, sir ; she was an exile like the rest of the de Chevreuxs and like us who served them. But see, there are the potatoes, sir," she continued, leading Western to the door of a little shed at the back of the house.

From the old woman's eager manner it was quite evident to Western that he would get no more gossip out of her while the question of the potatoes was still in abeyance, and, on the other hand, he knew the kindly influence exerted by the consciousness of a successful bargain, so he repressed his inclination to question the old lady further for the present and settled himself down to become her easy prey.

The affair was quickly settled, though he hung out a little for decency's sake, and the old lady opened the door of the shed to allow him to pass out again. As Western approached the threshold, however, he stopped suddenly, and looked quickly through the

crack between the door and the jamb. For as he passed it carelessly he had seemed to catch a quick glimpse of a black-coated figure hurriedly crossing the yard into the house.

He came to the conclusion that he had been mistaken, however, for on this occasion there was no sign of any one about, and the old woman had not even turned her head, though she must, from her position, have seen any one who had been there. And her next words made Western forget his hasty impression.

"Yes, my poor master did not live long after he lost his wife, sir, and no wonder! It was a sad day for him. He had not been married to her long, and with her she took to heaven their only child. Yes, wife and child in one day my master saw pass away, wife and child in one day. And he buried them both the same hour."

"How very sad," said Western, his heart beating fast. "And were you in the Count's service then?"

"No, sir, but I was up at the house that morning, and I knew it almost before my master did, for I met the doctor, who told me that there was little hope, even while he was keeping hope in my master's heart.

Ah, a fine pleasant gentleman the doctor, and a great man in London, they told me."

Western listened eagerly, while deciding not to give his real name for the delivery of the potatoes.

"And they were both buried the same day?" he said, "at Hillersley, or in France?"

Apparently the old woman had not caught his question, for she did not reply, but stood with her faded blue eyes looking out into the distance, buried in thought.

Western hesitated, and then repeated his question. "In any case I must know," he thought, "and I can find no one better able to tell me than this old lady. I only hope that the fact that I have inquired may not get round to Hillersley."

"At neither place, sir," said the old woman, starting and recalling herself. "The Countess and the poor little baby were buried at Horton, forty miles from here, where she had lived a time with her parents as a child; for the Countess's folk were exiles, too, of their own will. They——"

She stopped suddenly and turning, made a deep reverence, for Father Pink had appeared, standing at her side.

Dismay would be a mild word for the

emotions written on Western's face as he realized that the priest stood there by their side and that he must have heard—how much of the conversation? He attempted to disguise his feelings and took a look at the Father's round red face. But it told him nothing. The old scoundrel, Western told himself, was smiling easily as ever and surveying them both with the utmost benevolence; but that meant nothing: he had done the same the day he had stolen the letter.

"Sure, Western—George, I may call you I hope, considering what your father did for me—we are always running against one another, and never too often for me. So you've made the acquaintance of Françoise here, have you? You won't find a better or more honest woman in England, though she has one fault: she thinks too much of me. But that I can't find it in my heart not to forgive her for, ha, ha! And so you've made each other's acquaintance, have you, two friends of mine? I've seen the little one upstairs, Françoise, and she's doing finely; so set your heart at rest! And now, Mr. Western, I'll make you a wager that I guess how you came to make my old friend's acquaintance. You're after her seed potatoes now, aren't you? And you couldn't get

better potatoes anywhere, could he, Françoise ? ”

Western had recovered himself a little by this, as doubtless Father Pink intended, and he answered with as careless a manner as he could manage. “ Yes, you are right, Father Pink, as right as if you had been listening all the time. I have made a very good bargain, too, I think.”

Father Pink’s eyes twinkled. “ I hope so, my boy,” he said, “ I hope so. And now, if you are walking homewards, I will be glad of your company again.”

Western could raise no objection to so natural an offer and together they left the yard. At the corner of the road, however, Father Pink stopped suddenly. “ Sure, it must be the pleasure of seeing you again, my boy,” he said, rubbing his forehead in confusion, “ but I’ve been and entirely forgotten that I came to give honest Françoise a most important paper. And so you’ll have to excuse me after all. But you’ll find your way without me, my boy. And don’t forget that you are dining with us to-night. I have told de Chevreux, and he is delighted. I’m sure you’ll get on together ; you’re made for one another. Now don’t forget. Good-bye, good-bye.”

"The clever old scoundrel," said Western to himself as he made his way back to the inn. "He knows I see through his excuse, and he knows I know he sees through me, but he gets his own way in spite of all. He has gone back to pump Françoise, and to take care she tells me nothing more. But he can't know my object yet, or the piece of information I have obtained; and for the present the advantage is mine. I have no time to lose, though. And to-morrow I shall start for Horton. I fancy Françoise might be able to tell me much that I would like to know, but that must wait till the diamonds are found. There is something uncanny about that old priest, though."

Eight o'clock found Western making his way again up the avenue leading to Hillersley House. In spite of himself he felt a thrill of excitement as he thought of the coming evening. He was to be a guest in the house of the man from whose arms he was to snatch Renée, and he was to spend an hour or two under the searching eyes of Father Pink. It would require all his tact and self-command, he felt, to hold his own with these men and to obtain information without giving any; but for Renée's sake he felt himself equal to the task. And there was a third

person whose acquaintance he was to make—this Lucretia ; who was she ?

If de Chevreux was financially embarrassed, there was certainly no sign of the fact, Western concluded, as he entered Hillersley House, and passed through the magnificent hall, where several men-servants waited, into the brilliant drawing-room.

He was punctual, almost to the moment, and he found Father Pink and de Chevreux already waiting his arrival. The fat priest welcomed him effusively, but de Chevreux's cold eyes met Western's with a glance that hardly troubled to disguise open hostility on their introduction to each other. "So much the better," thought the latter ; "where there is no disguise there can be no treachery. And at least I prefer that to our friend Pink's rank duplicity." Yet he was glad to see that neither in de Chevreux's nor in Father Pink's eyes was there the slightest sign that they connected him with the rescue of the process-server earlier in the day. "I wonder where Lucretia is," he speculated after some conversation. But he had not long to wonder, for at that moment the door opened and a young woman entered the room.

Very small, almost tiny ; very dark, with hair rippling low over her white forehead,

great green eyes, and laughing curved lips, Western thought he had hardly ever seen any one prettier, or, as in a few minutes he was bound to confess, more fascinating.

“ My niece, Lucretia.” It was thus Father Pink had introduced her to Western, and from his expression and the tone of his deep rich voice, it was evident that the priest was proud of her and the impression she made. It was evident also that the young lady was accustomed to being spoilt and to having her own way, with the worthy priest at all events, though as regards de Chevreux Western could hardly say. The two seldom looked at one another ; yet he fancied, every now and then, that he caught a glance which seemed to imply that an understanding existed between the two, though the pale young man was silent and kept his eyes fixed for most of the time on his plate.

His silence and churlish manner made little difference, however, to the gaiety of the dinner. No function could possibly be dull at which Father Pink assisted, and Lucretia and he kept Western both amused and interested, until, between the worthy father’s rollicking stories, and the young girl’s gay chatter, the young man almost found himself forgetting the object of his presence there.

Yet every now and then, as he watched Lucretia, there passed through Western's brain the thought that there was something familiar to him either in the young woman's tones or appearance. Every now and then some note in her voice, some movement of her expressive hands, seemed to recall to him something out of the past, some memory which he could not trace, try as he would. "Have I seen her before?" he wondered at last. "It is impossible. She is not the kind of person one forgets, and yet——" But memory did not come to him and he gave up the attempt to solve the puzzle as vain.

Yet when dinner was over and they had moved into the drawing-room, the thought came to him again, and this time he felt that he knew the truth, realized it with a strange thrill of excitement and interest, wondering how it was that it had not struck him sooner.

"And now, George, my boy—forgive me, but you know your father saved my life!—you shall have the treat I promised you," said Father Pink, as he seated himself in a deep armchair and, folding his hands over his capacious waistcoat, composed himself for the evening. "Lucretia shall perform for you. You say you are fond of music. Lucretia, my love, where's your fiddle?"

She can sing too, Western ; but her fiddling ! Sure, she can make the strings talk till you'd think the saints were singing to you from Paradise."

Lucretia rose, laughing, in obedience, and Western followed her. "Can I help you to get your violin ?" he asked. "I am sure your uncle is a good critic, and that you play divinely. I anticipate delight."

The young woman laughed. "What a foolish thing to do," she said, turning her green eyes to his with a look which he could not fathom for the moment. "Delight anticipated is already spoilt. Have you never found that true, Mr. Western ?"

Something in her tone and look, or perhaps something beyond all these, made Western start, and look at her suddenly. But she did not wait and led the way to a little alcove at the further end of the drawing-room. "My violin is there," she said, "but do not trouble to assist me, unless perhaps you care to open the case for me. The fastening is rather hard to undo."

They had reached the alcove by now and Lucretia lifted the violin-case from a chair in a corner. She made a little effort, with contracted eyebrows, to undo the clasp and then held it out to Western, with a little

smile. He bent his strong fingers to the task, but as their hands were touching and he was looking down at her pretty graceful figure, he did not hasten the operation, which he felt to be a singularly pleasant one. Suddenly, however, by some queer accident, the electric light which illuminated the alcove failed momentarily, and they were left in darkness for an instant.

The young woman laughed, a rippling little sound, which made Western's heart give a leap. The touch of those soft warm fingers, that catch of amused laughter heard through the darkness, where had all this happened to him before? And then he knew and his heart beat fast, even while he couldn't restrain a smile.

But before either could move the light flashed on again, and the young woman, as if she had realized his discovery, seized the violin and with laughing eyes fled into the drawing-room. In another moment she was standing in the centre of the room, under the brilliant light, with her graceful figure poised lightly and her eyes fixed dreamily in the distance.

There could be no doubt that Father Pink was right, and that the tones which Lucretia produced from her violin were

indeed sweet enough to recall even the saints' singing in Paradise ; but they struck almost unnoticed on Western's ears, as he stood there watching her, confused and interested with the discovery he had just made. For he had no doubt that he *had* made a discovery. If Lucretia were not the girl of the assignation, of the darkened room at the hotel, the girl who had robbed him so cleverly of the diary, and whose hands he had kissed fancying them Renée's, then he was mad. But he was not mad. Her eyes, her laugh, her looks told him that. For as she played her eyes wandered every now and then to his, and in their depths was a smile whose meaning he could read now well enough. And as he noted her expression and recollected what a fool she had made of him, he felt his face grow red.

He walked towards her as she stopped playing and stood with a smile on her face in the centre of the room. "I have never heard anything more delightful," he said aloud ; and then observing that de Chevreux had left the room and that Father Pink still sat dreamy and contented in his chair : "What a fool you must think me," he said, low enough for her ears only. "I have waited a long time for you to keep your promise, but I have seen you at last. Though

not the person I thought you at the time, this pleasure is well worth the wait. But you treated me very badly."

The young woman laughed, blushing a little. "I do not in the least understand you," she said, though her looks belied her words. "But, good-night. I am sure you are dying to talk to my uncle and I see he is nearly asleep."

She held out her hand and Western, with a little laugh, took it. "Last time I kissed it," he said; but, laughing, she shook her head, as if not understanding, and fled.

"Ah, my beauty," he thought, as he looked after her. "You got the best of me last time, but wait! I will have my revenge yet, for Renée's sake."

Father Pink woke up from his contented dreaming when the door closed upon Lucretia. "Well, my boy," he said, with his red jolly face beaming. "Am I not a true prophet? Doesn't it do your heart good to hear her? Ah, her husband will be a happy man and here he comes."

Western started, as at that moment de Chevreux entered the room. Her husband? Her future husband de Chevreux? What could that mean? Was de Chevreux, then, playing a double game, even against

his own friends, and did Father Pink know nothing of the arrangement with Renée ? To disguise the agitation his last thoughts had given rise to, he rose from his seat and walked to the other end of the room, merely noticing as he passed de Chevreux that the pale young man's face was even more lowering than usual and that he had gone quickly to Father Pink's side.

As he fancied that a few whispered words passed between the two and that they were watching him keenly, he turned back again, and approached Father Pink.

"I think it is time for me to be making my way back to my inn," he said, easily. "Allow me to thank you for a most delightful evening. I cannot congratulate you too much upon your niece's accomplishments ; she—she is wonderful."

"Pooh, nonsense ; you can't go yet," said the priest, quickly. "We haven't had a chat yet, or a smoke. We must have a cigar together ; now just one. I will take no refusal. We will take no refusal, will we, de Chevreux ?" he continued, with a look at the young man, who stood biting his lip and scowling into the fire and merely grunted in reply. "Yes ; we will take no refusal," continued Father Pink, hastily. "Come this

way, my boy. We will go to my own special den, the most comfortable room in all the house, where even a housemaid never dares to set her foot and we can chat till, well, till you feel sleepy. But come."

And leading the way, he passed along the hall, followed by Western and de Chevreux, to a little room at the other end of the house and apparently below the ground level, for they descended a flight of stairs before they reached it.

A newly lighted fire burnt upon the hearth, and before this Father Pink pulled a couple of armchairs, and from a cupboard produced a box of excellent-looking cigars and a decanter of whisky. "Woman and wine are good," he said, helping Western, "but sometimes tobacco and whisky are even better. I suspect Luther didn't know much of the two latter when he praised the former so highly. But they are all good in their place. This is the place to smoke. Are you comfortable? Are you sure there is nothing else you want? Then we will have a talk. Has de Chevreux gone? Ah! Now, Mr. Western, what are your plans?"

Western started and looked at him, for his tone had suddenly changed and his red jovial face become serious, even stern.

"I don't understand," he said, at length.

"I think you do, Mr. Western," replied Father Pink, quietly. "I ask you what are your plans? You must have some, you know, or you wouldn't be here. Let me help you. You started with a diary and a letter. I robbed you of the first, and I hear now from de Chevreux that you have to-night guessed that Lucretia robbed you of the second. She is an intelligent girl, as you realize, and she did her work well. Fate gave you an opportunity to intervene in an affair which did not concern you, in the interest of people whose interests are not identical with ours. You had certain articles which might have interfered seriously with us and helped them considerably. You allowed us to obtain these articles and you must confess you did not make the task a difficult one. You must know, by now, sufficient of ourselves to be assured that your chance of ever getting back either that letter or the diary is infinitesimal, to put it mildly. You have no other evidence which could be of the slightest use to the people to whom you wish, as we do, to be friendly. Yet by your presence at the inn, even by your presence here to-night, it is evident that you have some object, some plan; therefore I ask you again: what is this plan?"

Western thought for a moment, looking Father Pink in the eyes steadily. "I am not sure that I have any definite plan," he said slowly. "But I am sure I should not tell you if I had. I thank you, however, for speaking so candidly. It will make things much simpler in the future."

Father Pink shook his head. "Ah, I am afraid it won't make things simpler in the future, my boy. That is just what I fear it will not do. It will make things more difficult. Unless, of course, you tell me that you agree with me that the best thing for you to do is go to back to London and forget all about these affairs, which really after all can have no interest for you. But you won't do that. I can see it in your face. Ah, that is what I feared."

"No, I certainly won't do that," said Western, shortly.

Father Pink frowned thoughtfully. "No," he said; "of course you won't. Then the only thing is to——But we will talk this over again in the morning. We won't spoil our cigars and our digestions by quarrelling at present. Come, will you have a little drop more whisky, and I'll tell you a story about how I——"

Western rose. "Thank you, I will have

nothing more," he said. "It is already late, and I must be going back to the inn. We will talk this over in the morning, if you will, but I assure you it will be useless. I——"

He stopped, for Father Pink was holding his hand up deprecatingly. "Now, my boy," he said calmly, "do be reasonable, please—do be reasonable. Just think for a moment, and do not—please, do not—talk of going away yet. Be reasonable, now; is it possible that you can expect to go away with things in this unsatisfactory state?"

Western frowned. "I do not know whether it is possible or not," he said. "But I am going."

Father Pink sat still, but he waved his fat white hand invitingly in the direction of Western's chair. "Do be reasonable, my boy," he repeated, looking actually quite worried over Western's insistence. "Ask yourself, could we allow you to go like this?"

Western took a step towards the door. "I decline to ask myself foolish questions," he said calmly, "or to discuss this matter further to-night. As I have already informed you, I am going."

And he opened the door.

Then he drew back a step, for outside were three men waiting silently.

CHAPTER XII

RESCUED !

FATHER PINK looked up from his chair as Western opened the door and glanced at the men.

"You see," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Now do be reasonable. You really cannot go like this. Now, come and sit down and talk it over; or go to bed and we will have a chat to-morrow. Really, you know, you mustn't go to-night."

Western turned to him, his face set and angry. "Do you mean to say this is a trap?" he asked. "That you want to make me a prisoner?"

"I certainly mean to say nothing of the kind," returned Father Pink. "Of course I don't want to make you a prisoner; you, my dear young friend, and the son of the man who saved my life! Put that idea from your mind at once, my boy. Nothing could be further from my wishes. Only," he continued, raising his voice the merest trifle, "only, it is precisely what I shall be compelled to do if you really insist upon

leaving us before we know exactly where we stand. Now, where do we stand, my dear boy ? Ah, here is de Chevreux. That really makes four against one, not counting my poor old useless self, should you be so ill-advised—which Heaven forbid—as to—Why, he's going to do it ! Foolish boy, foolish boy ! ” For Western, with the feeling that he had always disliked the man, and that he would at least get some satisfaction out of the situation, had sprung straight at de Chevreux's throat.

His satisfaction was short-lived, for the three men were upon him in an instant ; but during that time he managed to leave marks upon de Chevreux's pale face which would take at least some days to remove. Then he went down, struggling silently, but resigned to the fate which might be in store for him.

“ George, my poor boy ! ” cried Father Pink, who had been hovering silently on the outskirts of the struggle, and approached as the men, villainous-looking foreigners, succeeded at length in overpowering Western and sitting on him. “ I hope they haven't hurt you. Why wouldn't you listen to your old friend ? But I am sure you are reasonable now. Let him go, Baptiste.”

De Chevreux sprang forward, fuming with rage, his face bearing lively traces of its encounter with Western's right hand.

"Thrash him within an inch of his life, men!" he cried. "The devil has nearly blinded me."

But Father Pink raised his hand, and it was evident that he was the master there, even though the house were de Chevreux's. "Let him go at once, Baptiste," he said sternly; "and you, Jean, do you hear me! Now, go, and wait outside. If you are wanted, I will call again. But you won't be wanted, for you will be reasonable, my boy, now, won't you? Come, sit down again, and let us have a chat. You won't? Still unreasonable? Then you must be our guest till morning, my boy, and we will have another talk then. You will find that sofa very comfortable to sleep on. I have slept there often. There are cigars, whisky, everything you can want. You won't think better of it? Then, good-night." And drawing de Chevreux with him the priest closed the door behind him.

Western, still rather shaken with the struggle, rose as he heard the footsteps die away, and quickly examined both the door and the window. The door was thick, appar-

ently of iron, and was solidly locked and fastened. The window was small, fenced in with iron bars as thick as Western's wrist, and looked on to a brick wall about a foot away. It seemed rather a safe than a room that Western found himself a prisoner in.

He walked again to the door and listened for some minutes. He heard no sound and it was evident that no one was watching outside.

"There is no way of escape from this place," he thought. "That is certain, or they would never have left me here without a guard; the risk would be too great. Yet it is a dangerous thing that they are doing. People are not imprisoned like this nowadays without some one suffering. What is their game, I wonder? They can't keep me here indefinitely and I will never give my word. Yet it is quite plain that they care little for the law, witness that attack on my companion at the inn. They must be nearly desperate, for some reason, for they must know that inquiries will be made when my disappearance becomes noticed."

Western expressed confidence, yet his heart sank a little as he thought how much a long disappearance on his part might mean to

Renée Desilles, and realized that his absence might after all not attract the attention he hoped. For no one among his friends even knew that he had come to Hillersley, and as he was not known at the inn, and had paid nothing on account of his bill, his disappearance might be taken by the innkeeper as the sudden flitting of an impecunious swindler.

"Confound it all," he thought. "I am in a tighter place than I imagined. I must get out of this room somehow."

But another examination of his prison soon convinced him that, like the starling in Sterne's story, he could not get out, and he flung himself down in the armchair and, taking one of Father Pink's cigars, set himself to ponder.

He finished the cigar and then he must have dropped to sleep, for he roused himself with a start, at last, to see that the clock on the mantel-piece pointed to the hour of three.

"By Jove, I've been dozing, like a condemned criminal; though, by the way, I hope they have not condemned me," he thought, as he realized, after some consideration, where he was. And then he set himself to listen; for, as consciousness came back to him, it seemed to him that it was

rather some sudden noise that had awakened him than any disinclination for further slumber. And as he listened he became conscious that there certainly was something going on outside the window—a stealthy movement and a continued scraping, which in the silence of the night sounded strangely uncanny, and made his heart beat faster, in spite of himself.

The electric light still burned brightly and prevented him from seeing clearly through the heavily-barred panes of the window, yet as he peered through Western fancied he could catch sight of a grating some ten or twelve feet above him, and on this grating the body of a man. Was it indeed a man ? and, if so, who ?

He had not long to wonder. There was a sudden crack above, a muttered oath, a slithering and scrambling, and a figure fell heavily to the ground outside the window, scraping roughly between the window and the wall beyond, yet sustained on its feet by the narrow space between the two.

As the startled face came to a rest almost on a level with his eyes, Western gave a gasp of astonishment. It was his companion of the inn, the dismal man.

For a second the two stood looking at one

another through the glass, and then the process-server's face lightened. He rubbed himself, and nodded through the glass, making a gesture for Western to raise the window.

The young man attempted to lift the sash in obedience to the gesture, but it was firmly fastened, being evidently nailed to the frame. He was about to raise his elbow and smash the glass, when he saw that the dismal man was making furious gestures to him to desist, and was drawing something from his pocket. This article turned out to be a piece of some sticky substance which he applied to the glass, while with a glazier's diamond, which he produced from another pocket, he carefully cut out one of the panes. The glass when cut adhered to the sticky substance, and he put it carefully aside, meeting Western's glance with a little grin; "Though I have had lots of trades in my time I haven't been a burglar," he said, quietly; "but I have been a private inquiry agent, and sometimes we have had to do things which have come suspiciously near to burgling. But is there any one about, sir? Lor! what a start I got when that grating gave way before I expected it and I plumped down here. I thought I was making a noise like an earthquake and I feared it might not be you here after all."

"It's me, right enough," said Western, "but how awfully clever of you to guess I was here and a prisoner. I was wondering whether I should be missed ; but I never hoped to be found so soon."

"Well, sir, you have forgotten you helped me, I reckon. I haven't ; and I was a bit nervous about you. I saw you go out and heard you weren't going to be back to dinner. And, thinks I, this ain't a very pleasant neighbourhood to be walking about in in the dark, to judge by my experience. That gent will perhaps be taking risks if he happens to go near those beauties who set on me, and should chance to be recognized by them. So I followed you, sir ; I hope you will excuse me. I waited some time for you to leave this house, but you did not come and when I saw that it was getting on for three o'clock, I began to take a look round to find out what I could. I soon caught sight of the light down here—it is the only one in the house—and I thought I could see you once sitting in the chair. However, I was not sure and you didn't move, so I was trying to come down quietly, when I fell. 'Come down quietly,' I say, but I must have made a noise like a hundred of coals. I'm sure I have taken all the skin off both sides of me, that

place is so narrow ; but at all events they haven't heard me, have they, sir ? That's the great thing.'

" No, there's not a sound," said Western. " But come in and have a whisky. It will be spoiling the Egyptians. But I forgot, you cannot come in," he continued, with a glance at the bars. " And, by Jove, I cannot get out either."

" Don't you worry, sir," said the dismal man, calmly. " I can get in and you can get out, too, easy enough. That is," he continued, " supposing no one comes to disturb us. I suppose you can't lock that door on this side ? " he said, with an anxious glance in that direction.

Western looked. " No, there is no key," he replied ; " but I can put some furniture up against it."

" It don't matter, sir," said his companion. " It might only make more noise. We must do without and not waste time. But before I start I will have a drop of that whisky, sir, thank you. I think they owes me that."

Western fetched a glass and the bottle of liquor, and passed them through the pane which his companion had cut and the latter helped himself to a drink. " Now, sir," he said, wiping his lips, " you saw how I cut

that pane ? I want you to do the same to one or two others, so that you can get out all right. I will start on the bars meanwhile."

" But how on earth are you going to cut the bars ? " asked Western, surprised at the cool way his companion took the matter.

The dismal man undid his waistcoat and took off a broad leather belt which was round his waist and Western saw that it was cleverly contrived with little pockets. " I have got enough on me here to get into prison, if I was caught here to-night, and you didn't back me up, sir ; and I've enough to get me out of prison again, supposing they left me them. There's more than enough to cut a few bars with. I've been a lot of things in my time, as I told you, sir, and I sometimes find these things handy. Not that I ever use them dishonest, sir, bless you, no ; I was in the police force once myself and I know a trick worth two of that. But now I had better get to work, or we'll be here all night."

Western followed as well as he could his companion's instructions, but custom is everything, and though his work was child's play to the other's, the bars were almost through before the last pane of glass lay by his side.

When he had finished, he turned to his

companion and together they broke the last bar through.

"You are free now, sir," said the process-server, as he took the piece of iron and placed it carefully on the ground. "We had better be off."

"Father Pink will wonder a little how I managed it," said Western, as he clambered through the window, now open to the world. "Let him wonder. It will, I fancy, be some time before we meet again."

The grating through which the process-server had filed his way, only to fall in the end, was about a dozen feet from the ground, but the distance served as but a slight obstacle to the two companions after the more difficult work with the bars; and they speedily found themselves standing on the upper ground, with the cool quiet darkness around them and the house apparently as still and undisturbed as if the dead were its only occupants.

"Let us hurry back to the inn," said Western after a glance around. "The farther we are from this place the safer I shall feel, quiet as it looks now. Besides, I shall not be sorry to get to bed, nor you either I dare say. After all, we have both had a rather exciting day. By Jove, I can never thank

you enough," he continued, "for your help and cleverness generally. It may make all the difference to—to something I have undertaken, that I got out of that place to-night."

"Lor! sir, that's nothing," returned his companion. "It made all the difference to me that you stopped those blackguards from knocking me out. Turn and turn about is fair play. You did as much for me as I have done for you, sir. I wish I could do more for you, sir. You know your own business best, but if what you have got on hand is a little more than you can conveniently manage, why, with all respect to you, sir, my present billet is not the Bank of England, and my present employers wouldn't absolutely be ruined if I left them. But that is only by the way, sir, for you know nothing of me, of course."

"It seems to me I know a good deal about you. What is your name, by the way?"

"Wick, sir; William Wick."

"Well, Wick, yes, a good deal; and all that I know impresses me favourably. You seem eminently the kind of man one can rely on at a pinch, and you look like a man who can hold his tongue. Also, by the way, you have had a good deal of experience in ways that appeal to me particularly, as it chances,

at the present moment. But we will talk of this in the morning, Wick. Here we are at the inn, I see, so I will say good-night. I will think over what you suggest before we meet again. But, by the way, would it be necessary for you to give your present employers a long notice before leaving them ? ”

“ Not longer than the time to send it to them in a letter, sir. It’s only what you might call a makeshift ; and they can get plenty of poor devils to take my place. Oh, no, sir, I could be free at any moment, if you should want me, and if your business—which is not any business of mine—is one that is likely to lead you into opposition to that fat old Father Pink, and that white-faced sneak who set his men on to me, why you *will* be wanting me, sir, though perhaps you won’t like me saying so.”

“ I dare say you are right,” returned Western, smiling ; “ but I am too sleepy to decide on anything to-night at least. Tomorrow my brain will be clearer. I can tell you this, however : if I engage any one to help me it will be you ; and if I do engage you, I am quite sure I shall not have cause to regret it.”

“ I am sure you won’t, sir,” returned the dismal man. “ Good-night.”

CHAPTER XIII

RIFLING THE GRAVE

WESTERN had practically made up his mind to enlist the services of Mr. William Wick on his behalf when he said good-night to him at the door of his bedroom, and on the following morning he decided that he could not do better.

The process-server had already proved his value and his readiness to help by saving Western from his uncomfortable position the night before, and there could be no question that his experience and knowledge of the shady side of life might be of the greatest service to the young man in the work before him.

When he found Mr. Wick, therefore, awaiting him in the coffee-room of the inn, as he descended to breakfast, he decided at once to take him into his confidence, as far as might be necessary, and accept the offer which he had made.

Wick listened to him in silence while he told his story.

“ I don’t think much harm has been done since you have been at Hillersley, sir,” he said, after a few moments’ thought. “ On the other hand, you have done one good stroke. You have found out where her ladyship was buried and saved time that way. For it seems to me pretty evident that if there is anything in that idea of the hidden diamonds there is no time to waste. Even if the Hillersley House lot do not already know where they are, they may at any moment find out and then where will your friends be ? Do you think the old lady you saw, who used to be in the Count de Chevreux’s service, knows anything more than she told you ? ”

“ I should not be surprised if she knew a good deal more,” answered Western; “ but it is not advisable to attempt to make certain, yet, at all events. She seems to be too friendly with Father Pink. Indeed, even now I am not sure she may not have told him about my inquiries, and so, perhaps, put him on the track.”

“ It ain’t unlikely, sir ; and so I say again, there isn’t a minute to lose if there is any chance of really getting hold of the jewels. My advice to you is to go at once and see for certain if there is anything in the idea. If

there isn't, no harm will be done, so long as we are careful. If there is, and the diamonds are really there, you can take them and give them to those friends of yours, and it will be for the Hillersley House lot to prove their right to them afterwards, that is supposing they get to hear of the affair."

"You are right," said Western. "Your suggestion agrees with mine entirely. We will go to Horton at once. I wonder how one gets there? It is only forty miles from here, the old lady said."

"I will find out in a moment," said Wick. "It is better you shouldn't ask."

He returned in a few minutes. "It is a bad journey from here, sir," he said. "Loop lines, changes, and so forth. If we start at four, which is the time of the next train, we shall be there before nightfall, however. And in any case we should be able to do nothing before then. We can have a look round before it gets dark, and make our preparations if we are going to do anything."

"Then we will leave at four," said Western. "But had we not better buy the things we shall want, here, before we start? I don't like the idea of breaking open a grave in this way, and I expect we shall get into serious trouble if we are caught; but so far as *I* go, I

have got to do it if I wish to accomplish what I have set out to do ; I see no other way. But so far as you are concerned, Wick, if you would rather not go on, why just say so. On the other hand, if you care to go with me and take the risk, I assure you I am convinced that the diamonds belong rightfully to the people to whom I intend to give them, and that I will see you through any trouble that may come, to the best of my ability."

"It's a bargain, sir," said the process-server. "I have sailed as near the wind as that before in good causes, and risk doesn't frighten me much. You see, sir, I have not much to lose."

"If we get through this all right, you shall have something to lose, Wick," said Western, "though I hope you won't lose it. The only thing I really fear, myself, is that the diamonds may not be buried with the Countess after all. It seems rather a far-fetched idea, when one comes to look at it in cold blood. But I fancy there is no doubt that the old Count did really give a message to that effect to my father for his son, if ever he should chance to come back. But in buying those diamonds and leaving them to his son, he robbed my friends, and apparently this is the only chance they will ever have of recover-

ing anything. Let us hope that it may become more than a chance."

"You are right, sir," said Wick. "And right or wrong, I wouldn't give much for the chance of Father Pink or de Chevreux giving anything up, once they get hold of it. But, now as regards buying the things we shall require, sir. Perhaps you are right, and we had better get them here. It will attract less attention, and look less suspicious afterwards should inquiries come to be made. But I will do that part of the work, sir. I think I know pretty well what is likely to be necessary, and how to arrange. We have plenty of time before four o'clock; shall I start now, sir?"

Western assented, and Wick departed, to return in the course of an hour or so with a large green carpet cricket-bag under his arm, and this he laid on the floor at Western's feet.

"It's a bit heavy, sir," he said. "But I think it contains all we require, and it don't look very suspicious, does it?"

Western examined the bag, and then, opening it, looked at the contents with a little shudder. "All this makes me feel unpleasantly like a body-snatcher," he said, ruefully; "and I suppose when the time comes

to use these things, I shall feel more like one than ever."

The dismal man contemplated his purchases thoughtfully. "It does look a bit like what you say, sir; in fact, if you come to that, what we are going to do—but there, what's the good of thinking about it? From what you tell me, sir, we're going to put some friends of yours in possession of something that really belongs to them, and which they mightn't get otherwise. That's enough for me. It wouldn't be nice to be caught while we're doing it, so we mustn't get caught, that's all. But, bless you, sir, this Horton's a little country place, and we ain't likely to be caught."

"Well, I wish it was well over," said Western; "and I dare say you do, too; but as things are, we'll do our best. Hullo! what is it?" For Wick had suddenly run to the window. Western followed him, wondering, and looked out.

Outside in the road, at the door of the inn, stood a large motor-car, the occupants of which were in conversation with one of the horse-tenders, and to Western's surprise he saw that the motorists were Father Pink, de Chevreux, and two of the men who had secured him the night before.

While he looked, Father Pink glanced up at the window, caught his eye, and nudged de Chevreux ; and the car instantly started off, disappearing at full speed round the corner.

"Pretty cool," said Western, "to come round here so soon after last night." And he turned to Wick, but the latter had disappeared and Western, going to seek him, met him mounting the stairs again, his face rather flushed.

"They stopped to ask if you were still here, sir," he said quickly, "and they have taken the Horton road."

Western started and for a moment stared at him blankly. "Good heavens !" he said at length. "Then they must have found out somehow, perhaps through my talk with that old woman. And they have a fast motor car, while we must depend on a cross-country train !"

Wick nodded. "It certainly looks as if they had lighted on the truth, sir ; but we aren't done yet. They may get to Horton before we can, but it is quite certain they can do nothing before dark, unless they have an order to open the grave ; and that ain't likely. And by dark we shall be there ourselves."

"You are right, Wick," returned Western. "We shall get there before they can do anything, and then we must see. I do not for a moment think that they have got an order to open the grave. I believe that they have only just made their discovery. I do not believe they will try to act openly in the matter at all, for I am convinced that they are perfectly aware that both Hillersley and the diamonds, if there are any, really belong to my friends. But it is nearly four ; let us get off."

Wick nodded, shouldered the bag, and they set off to the station.

They eagerly scanned the road on either side of the line as they went along, but no sign of the motor-car met their sight, and the car and its occupants were probably already far in front of them.

They reached Horton at last, an ordinary little village, and descending from the train made their way from the station.

A few inquiries showed them that while there was an inn and a few cottages near the station, the greater part of the place lay at a distance of about three miles away.

"It seems to me it is probable that they have gone on to Horton itself to stay," said Western, looking round him. "In that case

we will remain here, as we don't want to be seen by them if we can help it. Let us take a look round."

It soon became evident that he was right, for there was no sign of the motor-car to be seen anywhere about the inn, and a discreet inquiry soon convinced them that Father Pink had not been seen there that day.

"We will put up here," said Western, "and when it grows dusk have a look at the village."

Meanwhile they soon discovered that a motor-car had arrived in the village some time before themselves, and from the description could have no doubt that it was the one which they had seen in Hillersley.

"It looks like being a struggle," said Western to his companion, as they returned to the inn to consider. "Do you know, I have an idea that I will telegraph to my friend, Mr. Desilles, to come down here? After all, if those diamonds are really in this grave they are his property, and if there is to be a collision between us and these people, as seems possible, it would be better to have him here with us."

"As you please, sir," returned Wick composedly. "He will be another hand at all events. Would he be of any use in a case like this, sir? Any good at a scrimmage?"

" Particularly good, I should say," returned Western, recalling his first glimpse of the big red-haired man. " Excellent in a scrimmage, but rather rash, I fear. But there is no doubt he has a right to be here; more right than we have. I should have suggested it before, but sometimes the whole thing seems so impossible that I feared to mention to any one else what I thought of doing."

" Well, it does not look as if Father Pink and his pal thought it so impossible, at all events," said Wick, reflectively; " for here they are, and if they are not here for the same purpose as us, what are they here for? I should certainly send a wire to the gentleman, sir. It might make us a lot safer if there is a fuss, and three is better than two in a case like this."

Yet if Renée's father should come to any hurt in this affair, what would she say to him. He had seen enough to be aware of the big man's hatred for de Chevreux, and his apparently uncontrollable temper. What would happen if the opposing parties should come into collision, should they even meet, as it seemed certain they must do. " Nevertheless, I must let him know," he decided. " While there was a chance of investigating

the matter quietly, I might have kept silent for the moment ; it is impossible now."

They had noticed the telegraph office near the entrance to the station, and Western and Wick together walked across to send the wire.

"Well, if he does not come, I have at least done my duty," said Western, as he despatched the wire. "He can get down to-night if he receives the telegram, for I see there is a quick through train from town which stops at Easton five miles from here. He can drive over. The rest is in the hands of Fate."

"Well, we'll do our best to help Fate out," said Wick, philosophically. "Personally, I have always found that the more she's helped the more she does. It is nearly dark now, sir. Shall we have a stroll round ?"

Western assented, and they set out for the village. They turned up the collars of their coats, and kept within the shadow of the hedges, as they made their way along ; but there was really little necessity for taking such precautions, for the dusk was already upon them ; indeed, when they reached the village at last, after taking at least one wrong turning, it was dark.

"We shall have some difficulty in finding

the burial-place," speculated Western, as they neared the village; "that is, if it gets much darker, for it would hardly do to inquire our way."

"Not unless we are obliged," returned Wick, who was looking anxiously about him. "But in these little places the church is generally somewhere near the centre of the village. It wouldn't do for us to separate, however, sir, as we might have a job to find each other again. We had better walk about till we come across the place. The others won't begin work yet, I don't suppose. But isn't that a church over there, sir? I think I see a square tower."

They hastened their pace, and approaching nearer saw that Wick's eyes had not misled him. To the right of them, nestling among the trees, a little outside the village, stood the stone building with the square grey tower which they sought.

They approached it carefully, walking noiselessly, half expecting to find de Chevreux and his companions already investigating the place, and nervous of a sudden surprise.

But no surprise came, nor was there the slightest sign of any other presence in the solemn little walled-in graveyard, which they reached by climbing the wall. All around

them was literally as silent as the graves at their feet, and the village in the distance seemed hushed in sleep.

"I have a dark lantern, sir," said Wick, after listening a moment or two, "and I think we had better try to find where the grave is. I am sure there is no one here yet ; and as for the villagers, we are pretty well hidden by the wall. It is certain we don't want to be seen, but I think we should be able to hear if any one came, and after all, until we start work, we can always say we are doing no harm."

Western repressed a little shudder at the words, but he nodded. "Yes, we had better find the place," he said quickly ; "but it is strange that the others have not been here yet. Of course they cannot tell that we have come too, but by their haste I should not have thought they would have delayed when once here, for it is dark enough and quiet enough for anything."

"It is a bit depressing, sir, ain't it ?" said Wick, reflectively ; "but we'll soon be through now. If you will kindly take the bag, I will have a look round. If we can find the place, I think we had better start straight away, and chance the others coming. But perhaps they won't come to-night."

Western hesitated. "But what about Mr. Desilles?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Better get through without him," returned Wick. "We have got a chance now which we mightn't have if we wasted time in going back. And if we get through all right we can meet him with good news."

"Come on, then," said Western; and, his companion lighting his lantern, they commenced their quest.

The search was a difficult one, for Wick's lantern was a small one, and caution made their progress slow. It did not surprise them, therefore, that for some time they came across no trace of the grave they sought; but after an hour's careful investigation, Wick stopped and wiped his forehead perplexedly.

"I suppose there is no doubt that the old lady did say Horton, is there, sir?" he asked. "Have you noticed—I have, and it's a funny thing—that there does not seem to be one of these graves less than twenty years old. Now I take it that these diamonds have not been buried so long as that."

"They have not," returned Western. "Are you sure you are right, though?"

Another and more rapid investigation, however, soon convinced him that the process-

server had spoken the truth ; and the two stood for a moment, looking at one another in dismay.

"There is no doubt of it, Wick," said Western, at last. "This is a disused cemetery, and we have been merely wasting our time here. That may perhaps account for the fact that we have seen no sign of the others. I am confident, however, the old woman did not intend to deceive me."

"Then there is another burial-place in use, sir, that is all. But how are we to find it ?"

"I see nothing for it but to risk everything and ask in the village," said Western desperately. "It will be dangerous, but it is horrible to think that those scoundrels may be already at work, while we are here helpless. I will go and ask myself."

"No, I will go, sir," said Wick firmly. "I can make such a mug that my own mother wouldn't know me again, and I'll work up a good story, never fear. You stop here, sir ; I won't be long." And taking his lantern he disappeared.

"It is for Renée's sake," thought Western, left alone in the silence of the graveyard ; "but it is a ghastly business. I wish I were only sure that the diamonds were really

there. But they must be, or what did that letter mean ? And why did de Chevreux and Father Pink come here in such haste ? They must have found out what I am so sure of. The brutes, suppose they are already at work ! ”

There is nothing more depressing than the neighbourhood of a churchyard on a dark night, and Western was heartily relieved to hear Wick's footsteps returning down the road.

“ Well ? ” he asked, as he hastened to meet him.

“ Well, it's all right, sir ; or rather it's all wrong. There's a new burial-place, and a new church, too. This is in disuse, as we might have seen if it had been lighter. The new one is the other side of the village. I found it all out from an old woman I met on the road. She wouldn't know me again, for she never saw my face, and I told her a story she swallowed. It has been a piece of bad luck, sir, this delay, and we must hurry up if we are to be in time.”

“ Come,” said Western, quickly ; and leaving the churchyard they hastened down the road.

Wick had been careful to take directions and a short walk brought them at length to

a newly-built edifice with a little spire and a neat brick wall round about it.

"This must be the place," said Wick, peering through the darkness over the wall. "But I wonder how one gets in. Hullo, hush! what's that?"

They pulled up suddenly and listened breathlessly. "I could have sworn I heard some one moving about inside there," whispered Wick, as he grasped Western's arm. "Can you hear nothing?"

They remained motionless peering about them, but no sound came; and Western moved silently forward, looking for the gate.

"I think it is over this way," whispered Wick, as he crept along the wall. "I can see bars, I fancy. Yes, here it is, and it's open, too. That is a piece of luck, for the wall's rather high. Hullo! there's that noise again, and this time there's no doubt of it. Why—good Lord——"

The words died on his lips, for at that instant a man sprang out from the darkness of the gateway and rushed wildly past him. Quick as lightning he made a grab at the flying figure, but it was already too late and his fingers only closed on air. The fugitive gave a little exclamation of delight, but the next instant it was choked in his throat, for

he had cannoned straight into Western, who walked behind, and together they rolled on the ground.

"Hold him, sir," murmured Wick, flying to the rescue, and he, too, seized the fugitive. The latter struggled desperately, but he was helpless, and soon the two companions had him gasping on his back.

Wick flicked his dark lantern on to him, and gave an exclamation. "I thought so," he said. "It is one of the Hillersley House lot. Look here, sir, a rascally alien."

Western peered down, and saw that it was indeed one of the men who had been the means of imprisoning him at de Chevreux's house.

"They must be here, then," he said, "Where are the rest of them?" he said addressing the prostrate man, sternly.

The man shook his head. "I do not understand, sir," he said. "I was here alone. Why have you attacked me? I was doing no harm."

"Don't argue with him sir," said Wick, quickly. "We are wasting time. We will tie him up and go and see for ourselves."

The man gave a despairing struggle. "Don't tie me up here and leave me, gentlemen," he said eagerly. "This place

and what I have seen terrifies me. If you leave me here alone and tied, I shall go mad. I will tell you all you want to know ; I will come with you ; anything you want, but don't leave me here alone. She will rise from her grave—she——”

“ Is it done, then ? ” said Western, quickly.
“ Are we too late ? ”

The man pointed, shivering, to the opposite side of the burial-ground. “ Yes, you are too late. I will come with you to show you, if you wish. We have just finished. We agreed to separate and all meet again at the station later. I missed the gate in the darkness, and as I found it I heard you. I waited, hidden, and then I knew you were coming in. I thought I might get by you.”

“ They have broken open the grave, then ? ” asked Western, almost choking the man in his excitement. “ What did they find ? Tell me, quick ? ”

“ Diamonds, a heap of them, in a little box—ah, it was enough to make one's mouth water, but, ah, it was horrible, too ! Not for ten times those diamonds would I go through that again. Nor would I dare to touch one of them. They belonged to the dead, and the dead will claim them. Let me go if you know all you want ; let me leave this place.”

The man's face—not a disagreeable one—was terribly drawn and pale beneath the rays of the lantern, and it was evident he had been badly frightened. “I believe he is speaking the truth, Wick,” said Western at last. “They have done their work and gone. That mistake of ours has been fatal. But we will have a look. Come, get up,” he continued, releasing the prostrate man. “Show us that you are speaking the truth, and you can go. Our business is not with you.”

The man rose hastily, evidently relieved. “It is over there, gentlemen,” he said. “If I must go back there I must ; but be quick.”

He led the way, stumbling across the uneven ground, with Wick and Western sticking close to his side, till they came at length to a halt before a mound of newly disturbed earth. A glance was sufficient to tell them that the man had spoken the truth, and that his companions had fled, taking their spoil with them.

“He is speaking the truth ; there is no doubt of that,” said Western, turning away with a shudder from the sight. “I am afraid it is all up, Wick. We had better get back to the station inn.”

The process-server did not reply for a moment. He was stooping down, apparently

bent on examining closer the grave from which Western had turned, repelled.

"It seems so, sir," he said at last. "But what about this scamp, here?"

"He had better go," returned Western. "There is nothing to be gained from him now. Off you go," he continued to the man, who did not wait for a second bidding, but turned and fled.

Wick waited until he had disappeared, and then drew Western to the open space outside the wall. "I have found something, sir," he said. "I don't know whether it may be important or not. I suppose it must have dropped out of the box when they were looking at the diamonds, and passed unnoticed in the excitement. It is a paper."

Western seized it eagerly and, while Wick held the lantern, looking cautiously about him, he examined the find.

It was a thin sheet of paper, covered with writing, and had evidently been used to wrap up something, probably the diamonds.

"You may have found something worth more than the stones those rascals have got," said Western, looking up at last. "How did you come to notice it?"

"There were several pieces of stuff lying round, linen or something that had been used

to fill up the box that chap talked about, I suppose, and this had got folded in one of the pieces. I expect they were too glad to get the diamonds to bother about examining the rags. It was an accident I caught sight of it. I did not like to call your attention to it, sir, while that dirty foreigner was still hanging round. But I am sure I hope it is valuable ; it don't look so."

"Of its precise value, I am not sure, but it may be of the greatest importance," said Western, folding the paper up and putting it in his pocket. "And now let us get back to the inn. We shall have to take the bag with us still, I suppose."

"It certainly would not do to leave it, though it ain't much use to us now, sir. I expect there will be a pretty fuss about this night's work, and we don't want to be connected with it. But I will carry it."

"The first thing is to find if Mr. Desilles has come," said Western, as they hastened towards Horton. "If he has, I believe I shall have some good news for him after all."

But Mr. Desilles had not come, nor was there any answer to Western's telegram, as they discovered on reaching the inn. No one had inquired for them during their absence, nor had any one arrived by the London train,

apparently ; and as to the motor-car and its occupants, nothing had been seen of them again in Horton, though one of the stablemen averred that he had heard the car flying through the village fully an hour before Western's return.

"There is nothing to be done to-night," said Western at last, when their inquiries were completed. "There is not even a train by which we could get back to Hillersley. We have done our best and been beaten ; we had better go to bed and think over what is to be done to-morrow."

But the morrow brought Western a fresh blow, and one that went near to robbing him of all his courage.

This was a letter from Mr. Desilles in reply to his wire. It was very coldly worded, and Western, as he realized its import, sat gazing blankly in front of him. Mr. Desilles declared that he could not understand how his presence could be required at Horton, and begged to inform Western that so far as the question of the de Chevreux inheritance was concerned, the matter had been settled amicably between the present possessor and himself. He also informed Western that the marriage between de Chevreux and his daughter was to take place within a week.

CHAPTER XIV

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD

WESTERN sat for half an hour after he had finished Desilles' letter, buried in thought. Fate seemed indeed too cruel. Renée to be married to that scoundrel within a week—and in his pocket, he, Western, held the proof which the Desilles had sought so long: the proof that the old Count had really robbed them.

But of what use was it now? It was evident that Desilles and de Chevreux were at a perfect understanding and that his interest in proving his own claim had vanished entirely with the settlement of the approaching marriage. The de Chevreux inheritance, even the diamonds, Western supposed, would now be shared with Renée, and what good were Western's proofs? Yet who could say? What were Renée's thoughts? That was the question.

And as he came to that, Western felt his spirits revive; for he remembered his talk

with the young girl in the Temple Gardens, the expression which had crossed her face at the mention of de Chevreux's name, and the thought of a marriage with him. He felt that to her, at least, this settlement which Desilles considered so satisfactory could never be anything but hateful and he tried to draw hope from that. If he were to show her this document which he had found ; if he could prove to her that the inheritance were really her father's, would she draw back even then ? Ah, if he could have taken Desilles those diamonds, what a difference it would have made ! But how to hope to get them now ; how to hope even to convince Desilles that they had ever been recovered ?

He took out the paper which Wick had found and read it through again.

"To my dear son," it was headed, "if ever he should return.

"Victor," it ran, "they tell me you are dead, but I, your father, the one who loves you best in all the world, will not believe it. You live—my heart tells me so—and some day you will return and read this letter. I know it. Victor, it is a strange heritage I leave you, when I write this and place it in your step-mother's grave ; for before you may enjoy it you will have a question to decide,

a step to take which must cost you anxious thought. I have answered that question for myself in my way, and it has brought me to the grave ; you—I wonder what you will do ?

“ Victor, neither the estate I leave you, nor even these jewels that are buried here are mine or yours ; they belong by right to your step-mother’s family : to the Desilles. I loved your step-mother dearly, Victor—you, my beloved son, seemed lost to me for ever—you can imagine, therefore, my joy when I knew that I was again about to become a father, that the name of de Chevreux was not yet to vanish and be forgotten. Besides this, Victor, I had spent much money ; I had not thought to have any cause to save, and debts were pressing me on every side. And though I did not covet your step-mother’s fortune, still the birth of a child would secure that fortune for our family. Victor, I had been too happy in your step-mother’s love : such happiness is not permitted us, and I was to suffer for it, and how heavily ! The child was born—a poor weak creature with but a few hours’ life in its frail body, and its coming robbed your step-mother of her life. It fell to the lot of my dear friend, Western, to break the news to me that in a few short

hours neither mother nor child would remain to comfort me. Victor, the child died first. When the first shock of my bereavement had passed, I realized that another unlooked-for and stunning blow had fallen on me. The child dying first, your step-mother's dowry would return by our law to her family. You know what my feeling has always been for the Cause that from a child was nearest to my heart ; you know the pride we de Chevreux have always had in our name. That half-hour's difference between mother and child's death meant ruin to me. I saw my ambitions ruined, my name dishonoured.

"In my despair, I turned to my friend, the friend of half a lifetime. Never cease to be grateful to that man, Victor : distressed at my overwhelming misfortunes, moved by my prayers, he did for me what nothing would have compelled him to do for himself. Only three persons—myself, Dr. Western, and Françoise Perrin—knew or could know which died first, your step-mother or my infant son. Only one person had the right to say : my friend. Victor, I deceived that man ; he thought he was wronging no one living, and with a stroke of his pen he made me, from a beggar, a wealthy man again. Yet I believe the act ruined his life ; it ruined

mine, I know. I had no peace from that moment, Victor ; but I could not make restitution even then. Though I knew the truth would never transpire, yet I was always haunted by the thought that it might ; and the idea that some day you would return to find yourself doubly ruined by my act made my life miserable.

“ When I knew at last that my days were numbered, this fear became a torture, and at last I decided on the step of which this letter is the result. Victor, I loved you too well. I cannot die and risk leaving you penniless. I feel you will return ; but chance, coming who knows whence, may put you at the mercy of the people I have robbed. They may claim and win from you the heritage I would have left you. In this letter are the means to secure your future. My friend, faithful through everything, will give you the message which will tell you how to find this : a message which he understands already, and which you will understand. Whether you will use the means which this will afford you, I know not. That is for you to decide. Yet I think you may, for my sin has been paid for with my broken life.

“ Good-bye,

“ YOUR FATHER.”

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"Renée shall see this," thought Western. "With the evidence of the letter and the diary, it will prove her father's claim to the old Count's wealth ; with the evidence of that old woman, even without those, it should be sufficient. Will it suffice to stop this marriage ? Who can tell ? But I must see Renée at all costs."

He went downstairs to the parlour of the inn where Wick was awaiting him, his solemn features as unemotional as if his adventures of the night before had been the most ordinary events of a day's work.

"I am going back to Hillersley, Wick," he said, "and then on to London. This paper which you found was an important document, after all ; and I must see my friends as soon as possible."

"Right, sir," replied the process-server obediently, "I am at your service if you want me ; and in any case I must go back to London, I suppose. But shall you want me, sir ? Are you going to have a further try for those diamonds, sir ? There ain't much doubt they were there now, is there ? "

"I do not know about the diamonds, Wick," said Western, rather disconsolately. "I am afraid we must consider them gone ;

but I may yet be glad of your help, if you are still willing to follow my fortunes."

"You have only to say the word, sir. What I want is to see you get even with that Hillersley House lot ; then I'll be happy."

"I am afraid they have rather beaten us, so far," said Western, smiling at the process-server's tone. "But we will see. Nothing can be done until I have been to town, at all events. And I must get my things and pay my bill at Hillersley first."

"There's a train to Hillersley at twelve," said Wick, looking at his time-table.

"Then we will go by that," said Western. "I don't like the idea of leaving Hillersley without speaking my mind to Father Pink and his friend with regard to their treatment of us, but I expect it would serve no good purpose. Chance may give us an opportunity to have our revenge yet ; and I am afraid for the present we shall have to trust to Chance."

And before Western had been in London long he was to find that Chance was to be of considerable assistance to him.

CHAPTER XV

BLACK MURDER

WESTERN wasted little time on his arrival in town, but taking Wick's address, where he could communicate with him should occasion arise, he drove to his rooms, tidied himself after his journey, and set out for the Desilles' home.

From the tone of Desilles' letter to him, he did not have much hope of a favourable reception ; but he decided that he must, in any case, see Renée's father first ; afterwards, if need were, he must rely upon herself alone.

Their home was a shabby little house in a dingy street not far from the Strand ; and as Western cast a glance at it, before ringing he thought he understood Desilles' desire for this money, which he felt to be his, even his willingness to consent to a marriage which would assure his daughter of some certain share of it. " Renée, my darling, that you should have to live here," he thought, " or leave it at such a price ! "

" Mr. Desilles is out," said the shabby little maid who answered the door to him, looking

at him doubtfully. "But I think the young mistress is in, if she would do."

"Take in my name—Mr. Western," said the young man, quickly. "And ask her if she can see me."

The maid returned in a moment with the message that Miss Desilles would see him, and Western followed her with beating heart. What would she say to him? Would she be glad to see him again? Would she welcome the news he brought her? Or had he come too late?

Renée rose from a seat in the corner of the little dingy sitting-room as he entered.

"You," she said, slowly; "Mr. Western! How strange!"

"Yes, Miss Desilles, it is I," returned Western, marking how pale she looked, and that her eyes were startled and eager. "Are you surprised that I have come? Last time I saw you, you gave me permission to work for you. I swore that I would obtain the proof that the fortune of which you had been robbed was really yours: that I would save you from—from this marriage which—which I felt could never be a happy one for you. I have got the proof: or I have got sufficient—the rest can be but a question of time; yet, from your father's

letter to me yesterday, it seems that my work has been useless, my hope in vain."

"My father's letter to you?" Miss Desilles was looking at him in astonishment.

Western hesitated, and then seeing that the young girl was ignorant of the correspondence between him and Desilles he decided to tell her his adventures of the past few days and their results.

Renée listened to him eagerly, while he related the failure of his plan for the recovery of the diamonds, and his unexpected finding of the Count's letter; but her face was troubled as she raised her eyes to meet his and Western felt his heart sink.

"I have made but a poor success of my task, I fear," he said, slowly. "But it seems that it matters little, for I see in your face that in any case I am too late."

The young girl flushed and then turned paler than before. But she remained silent and Western saw that his question was answered.

"You have done more than we could ever have hoped," she said at length; "more than any one else, I believe, would or could have done. We—I shall never cease to be grateful——"

"But it is too late?"

Renée's head bowed, but her lip was tremb-

ling and it was evident that she was on the point of breaking down ; and, moved to the heart, Western stepped quickly to her side. "Renée, why should it be too late ?" he said eagerly. "Why must this sacrifice be carried out ? Renée, I love you : I have loved you since the first moment I saw you. I am not rich, but I have sufficient to keep you from poverty or want. Your father wishes this marriage, I know ; it is for that you have consented to it, is it not ? But even a father's rights are limited : he cannot compel you to this marriage against your desire. You are free to marry whom you will. Renée, I love you with all my heart and strength ; I feel I am not quite distasteful to you, that if I had met you sooner I might have hoped. Renée, I think you care for me ; I see it in your face, though you turn it from me. Tell me that I am not mistaken."

His eager pleading made the young girl tremble, but with an effort she tried to draw her hands from his.

"It is too late ; it is too late !" she murmured. "Let me go. I must say nothing."

But even as she spoke she tottered and Western caught her in his arms. For a moment she resisted and then with a little cry she dropped her head on his shoulder

and burst into tears. "Oh, save me from this hateful man!" she cried. "I cannot help it; I can struggle no longer; I hate him."

"Then as I live you shall not marry him!" cried Western, pressing her to his breast and kissing her tear-stained face. "And, after all, why should you? Even your father must yield now, for have I not the proof that this fortune is yours without the marriage?"

The young girl shuddered and drew back a little. "A little while ago that would have been enough," she said, trying to control her agitation. "But now—Oh, I do not know what has occurred, but something has changed the situation entirely: something which has happened lately, something which has to do with M. de Chevreux. I believe—oh, how can I tell you?—that my father is expecting to receive a large sum of money from that man. Oh, do not think too badly of him; we have been so miserably poor; he has been so terribly anxious; and though he would never force me to take the step, I know what it would mean to him."

A large sum of money? Western's thoughts flew back to the process-server's visit to Hillersley, and then he remembered the diamonds.

"Has your father seen de Chevreux very lately?" he asked. "When did you gather this?"

"Only within the last few days. But I cannot tell you all; only I know it is true. And though we could prove that Hillersley really belongs to us, it would cost much money and time to put us in possession of our rights, and——"

"And your father would sacrifice you rather than wait—— But, Renée, listen to me; is it true you care for me?"

The young girl shuddered and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, why torture me!" she cried. "It is too late; I was mad just now."

But Western had her in his arms again and her whispered answer at last convinced him. "Then I will save you yet, as I said I would. Ah, Renée, to-day has made me the happiest man living. That scoundrel shall not have you, my darling; and your father shall have the money without de Chevreux's help."

Renée looked up quickly. "Not yours? ah, he would never take it from you. From that man it would be his own, after all; but from you——"

"I did not mean that, Renée," said Western, quickly, "though Heaven knows how

willingly I would give all I had to save you. Listen ; as I live, I believe that this money with which that man is trying—forgive me, darling—to buy you is already your father's, would have been in his possession to-day, had I been but a few minutes sooner at the Countess's grave. But, Renée, he will have to deal with me first."

"Oh, don't," murmured Renée, clasping Western's arm. "You will go into further danger ?"

"The only danger I fear is to lose you, Renée, darling. But danger or no danger, I must act or it will be too late. Where is your father ?"

"He went out not long before you came. He received a telegram which seemed to upset him very much, and he rushed out without even saying good-bye to me. I am afraid he has had bad news. It is something to do with that man, I think, for I heard him utter the name of de Chevreux ; but it was not from him, I am sure, for he was here himself not long ago."

"De Chevreux ? Is he in town, then ?"

"Yes, he came to-day from Hillersley—in haste, I believe. He motored up."

Western pondered for a moment. "Where does he live ? In London ?" he asked.

"I do not know. I believe he has a house not very far from here, but where I cannot say."

"I must find out," said Western. "And now, good-bye, Renée. Promise me that you will do nothing; take no step till you see me again."

"Ah, I promise," said the young girl, sadly; "but you are going into danger for my sake, and I am afraid."


Western pressed her fingers to his lips. "Fear nothing," he said. "Wait and trust in me."

* * * * *

On leaving Renée, Western took a cab and drove straight down to the address Wick had given him. Fortunately he found the process-server was at home and ready and willing to be of service.

"I want to find de Chevreux's London address at once, Wick," said Western. "Can you help me?"

The dismal man's face lighted up. "You are going to have a shot for those diamonds, after all, sir?" he asked. "Well, I thought you would not let them go so easily. But we'll beat them right enough this time, sir; you take my word for it. De Chevreux's London address, is it? Why, yes, I happen to know that. I've tried to serve him there



before to-day. It's an out-of-the-way place, up in the north parts. I can take you there ; but what are your plans, sir ? Had we better go while it's light ? ”

“ My plan is to get hold of those diamonds by some means or other, Wick, even if I have to risk going to prison for them,” said Western. “ They do not belong to this man, de Chevreux, rightfully, and I am going to see that the legal owners get them. It is true they were left to de Chevreux by his father, but the letter you found is itself a practical acknowledgment that they were wrongfully taken from the Desilles. To the Desilles I am going, somehow or other, to return them ; but I have no plan, Wick, that is quite true.”

“ We will go and have a look at the house sir,” said the process-server, “ and perhaps we'll think out something going along, and when we have seen how the land lies. But we had better be careful not to be seen hanging round the place.”

It was quite true that Western had determined at any cost to recover the diamonds from de Chevreux, and to return them to Desilles ; but it was also true that he had not the slightest idea how he was to set about the task he had undertaken ; and as they made their way northwards the difficulties in the

way of its accomplishment became more and more apparent to him. It was hardly likely that de Chevreux would allow himself to be tamely dispossessed of what was in itself a fortune, and he had in his pay men who would stick at nothing. Yet Western felt that he had two points at least in his favour. He had discovered a valuable ally in Wick, and so far as he knew Father Pink was still at Hillersley. It was a great relief to feel that the priest was out of the way, for up to the present Western confessed that he had failed lamentably when pitted against him.

"It is near here," said the process-server, at last, stopping the cab and preparing to get out. "We had better not drive too close."

They paid the man, dismissing him and, turning off the main street, Wick led the way down one of the quietest of the shady groves in the neighbourhood of St. John's Wood.

"That's the house over there in the far corner, sir," he said, pointing in the direction indicated, "and a nice little sheltered spot for any kind of wickedness, too. Hullo, there's some one coming out; and don't he look ill, too?" he continued, as the newcomer approached. "But draw in here a bit, sir; we don't want to be seen."

As he spoke, he drew Western aside from the road into one of the gardens, and they peered out.

But even as they looked, Western gave an exclamation of surprise and started forward. A big red-faced man was coming towards them, reeling as he walked. His collar was unfastened, his features were purple and distorted, apparently with rage, and he was gesticulating wildly. He had almost passed Western and his companion, taking not the slightest notice of their presence, when he stopped, staggered and fell. "The scoundrel!" he gasped. "The scoundrel—the diamonds—Renée——" and pulling feebly at his collar he fell back.

In a second Western had reached him and supported him, while he loosened his tie and waistcoat. "Mr Desilles! don't you know me?" he cried. "What is it? What has happened?" But the big man's heavy breathing and glazed eyes told him that his questions were unheard.

"It is Mr. Desilles, my friend, Wick," he said. "Run quickly, and see if the cab is out of sight. If not, stop the man, and bring him here. This is a fit and may turn out seriously; I must get him home to his daughter."

Wick disappeared and Western remained by the prostrate man, wondering what had been the cause of his seizure: vainly, for Desilles lay senseless, and no other words of which Western could gather the meaning came from his lips.

Wick returned in a few minutes with the cab which he had succeeded in stopping and, with the assistance of the driver, they managed to get the insensible man into the vehicle. "Stop here, Wick, and watch the house until I return," whispered Western quickly. "I will see Mr. Desilles home, and when I have put him in his daughter's charge I will come back."

Wick nodded his comprehension and, giving Renée's address to the cabman, Western drove off.

"It must be a fit," he thought, as he drove along. "For there are no signs of injury. He was furious as he left that house, that was evident. What can have transpired there, I wonder? Can he have learnt the truth about the diamonds, or has he heard of Lucretia, and was I right when I guessed that scoundrel de Chevreux was playing every one false, friend and foe alike? But poor Renée; what will she say? Ah, here we are at last."

He had hoped to get Desilles in quietly and break the news to Renée afterwards ; but the young girl must have seen them before they reached the house and she was already at the door when they drove up.

She waited, pale and trembling, while Western and the cabman again lifted the unconscious man and bore him into the house. " Father, my poor father ! " she cried. " Tell me he is not dead ! Ah, I feared when he left me like that that some misfortune was about to happen. "

" No, it is only a fainting fit, " said Western, quickly. " Can you send your maid for a doctor while we get him upstairs ? He will come round directly, but it is better to have assistance. Has he had a seizure of this kind before ? "

Renée shook her head. " Never, " she said. " But I have feared lately that he would. He has been so anxious and worried. "

" But how did it happen ? " she continued, when they had succeeded in getting the insensible man disposed on a couch, and having done all that was possible, awaited the arrival of the doctor.


" I know very little more than yourself, " said Western. " We—I was standing in the street—it was near de Chevreux's house ;

I had found the address, and was going there to see him, when your father suddenly came from the house. He seemed fearfully excited and over-wrought, and while I was still hesitating whether to speak to him or not, he staggered and fell. I ran to his help and brought him here. I fancy—it may be only imagination, of course—that he must have learnt something from this de Chevreux which upset him, something connected with the hidden diamonds, for he murmured a few words before he lost consciousness.”

Renée was silent, evidently thinking deeply, and they remained without speaking, watching the unconscious man, whose breathing seemed at length to grow calmer.

After a time the doctor was announced, and as he took a favourable view of Mr. Desilles' condition, and declared that there was no immediate cause for anxiety, Western again took leave of Renée, and set out once more for St. John's Wood.

He had been gone some considerable time, and it was beginning to grow dusk, when he reached the little road where he had left Wick. Would the process-server be still there? he wondered, as he made his way towards the house which had been pointed



out to him as de Chevreux's ; or had he grown tired of waiting ? The latter, it seemed, for as he approached the garden that led from the door to the front gate, he saw that the road was empty, and there was no one about.

" Confound it, Wick has gone, after all," he thought, peering through the shrubs in the direction of the house, " and apparently the inhabitants of the house have vanished too, for there is not a sign of life about the place. It seems as deserted as the tomb."

A few minutes seemed to confirm this impression, for though Western examined the front of the building carefully, he caught no glimpse of light or movement, nor could he hear a sound to imply that there were living people in the place.

Impatient at last, he entered the little garden cautiously and, keeping in the shadow of the shrubs over which the dusk was already extending, he passed the front of the house and, after listening for a moment, made his way round to the back.

This was as deserted as the front, but as Western peered cautiously about, to his surprise, he suddenly became aware that the back door of this silent building was standing wide open.

Startled, Western stood for a moment

almost in the attitude of a well-trained pointer, staring at this door. Then, making up his mind, he approached it cautiously.

It opened into a small back passage, the continuation of which was hidden in the growing shades of night and, though it seemed to leave the way open to this mysterious dwelling, it helped to elucidate none of its mystery.

"Bother!" said Western, at last. "The place is empty; there is no doubt of it; but it has got on my nerves, and I am going in to have a look round. If it is empty, there is nothing to fear; if it is not, well, I shall have got rid of the uncanny feeling that there's something about all this that wants explaining."

And he stepped into the passage. Though it was dark it was not too dark to see his way, and Western, still stepping cautiously, passed the kitchen, silent and unoccupied, and made his way into what was evidently the front hall. Here he paused for a moment to find a match and take a glance about him.

He found the matches in his pocket, but in opening the box he spilt some of them on the floor. He stooped quickly and, groping round with his fingers, picked up as many as he could find. Then he struck one; but

almost as he did so he dropped it quickly, for by its momentary light he had discovered that his fingers were stained with blood.

He stood for a second, agitated : then he struck another match and examined the carpet at his feet.

There could be no doubt of the horrible fact that had so startled him ; not only his fingers but the rug on which he stood were stained deeply, nay, were still wet with blood.

Pulling himself together, he held his match aloft, and examined the hall in which he found himself. Shuddering, he caught sight of a second but smaller stain a little way from where he stood, but the feeble rays from the lucifer gave him no glimpse of the body he expected every moment to come across, and the match burnt down to his fingers.

"I must find a lamp or something of the kind," he thought, "or this will send me mad. It is too ghastly fiddling about with these matches."

But even as he drew out another vesta from the box, a sound behind him made him pause suddenly and listen, for, unless it was the thumping of his own heart in the intense stillness, some one was creeping cautiously past him in the hall.

He rubbed a match rapidly against the

side of his box, but it failed to ignite, and before he could make the attempt again, match and box together were struck from his hand, and he heard some one rush past him into the passage by which he himself had entered.

Taken by surprise as he was, Western yet did not hesitate a second, but dashed in pursuit. He reached the back door almost as soon as the person he pursued, but the latter, with the quickness of despair, slammed it in his face, and by the time Western had fumbled for the handle was already flying down the garden. "But you are not safe yet," thought the young man, "though you are pretty quick. I'll have you in the street."

But the murderer—for such Western took him to be—passed through the garden and down the street with the speed of a greyhound, and for a time Western feared that he had been too sanguine. He was a good runner, however, and he had a square determined chin, and the chase would doubtless have been a long one, but that to Western's delight his opponent suddenly tripped and measured his length upon the ground.

He was not done yet, however, for as the young man darted upon him, he tripped him cleverly, and with a spring he sprang to a

wall facing them, and in a second was astride it and nearly over the other side. He would have been entirely over, but that, with the strength of despair, Western had flung himself after him, and seized the leg of his trousers. "Not yet," he said, breathlessly, "not if your trouser holds."

To his amazement, the wearer of the trousers gave a hasty exclamation, and the rest of his body appeared again over the wall. "Mr. Western, sir!" he gasped, and dropped at the young man's feet.

Western gasped in his turn. "You, Wick? Why, I thought at least you were murdered, and half believed I was pursuing your murderer. But then what did that blood mean? And why on earth did you run so?"

"Run? No wonder I ran, sir. I hope I may never be so frightened again. But there *has* been a murder, and it was for that I was alarmed. I did not want to be found hunting over that house, and a dead body lying on the floor downstairs."

"Who has been murdered and how? Tell me quickly, Wick," said Western, eagerly.

"Let's come a little farther away from here," said the process-server. "Some one may have heard you running after me, and they might take it into their heads to wonder

what we are up to. And it is a long story, if I have got to tell you anything at all. But I feel precious thirsty after my fright—lor', how you did make me run, sir! If I hadn't tripped up I—but there it's a good thing I did or I'd never have stopped. But as I was saying, sir, I feel pretty thirsty, and in the days when I was in the force there used to be a nice quiet little place near here where we could have a drink and I could tell you everything, sir."

"Anything you like," said Western, impatiently. "Lead the way; but tell me first who has been murdered—whose blood was that?"

"The blood of the owner of the house, sir—de Chevreux's."

"But who killed him? Not—surely not Mr. Desilles?"

"Father Pink killed him, sir. But here we are and I am not sorry, for I am not so young as I was and I feel I want to sit down for a minute. You see it's been an exciting time since you left me in the afternoon, sir."

They had reached a quiet-looking little public-house standing hidden away in a corner of the road, and into this Wick led Western, making his way, with the air of one familiar with his neighbourhood, along

the passage, past the sanded bar, and into a small sitting-room. He gave an order, said a few words aside to the proprietor, and shut the door carefully after the waiter when they had been served.

"We shall not be disturbed here, sir," he said, taking a long pull at his drink, "and I'll tell you my story, and then we can think what we are going to do."

"Go on," said Western. "I am dying to hear it all."

"Well, sir, when you had gone off with that gentleman in the cab, I thought I would take a look and see if there was anyone about that house, and whether I could get any idea of what caused that gentleman's attack. It looked to me as if he had been having a row with some one, and I wondered who and and what it was about.

"Well, it was getting a little bit dusk by that time, as I dare say you remember, sir; and I managed to creep up quite near to the house, at the same time being certain that I had not been caught sight of. And when I had got quite close under one of the side windows, I could hear the sound of voices above my head, and it wasn't two minutes before I knew that there was a furious quarrel going on. I did not want to risk being seen, but

I managed to get so that I could just peep into the room where the voices came from, and I saw Father Pink and de Chevreux going it hammer and tongs."

"Fighting?"

"No, sir, but precious near it. But the young one was afraid of the old one—that was easily seen—though it was in his eyes that he would have killed him if he could, and it was his voice that was raised the most. Well, I knew that when thieves fall out there is always something to be picked up, and I listened with all my ears; and this is what I made out of it. It was evident that the row had commenced in the presence of the gentleman who had just gone out, but apparently he was not the first cause of it. What had first started it, to all appearances, was the young one playing the old one false, and clearing out from Hillersley with the diamonds they robbed us of, or rather robbed your friends of, sir. And the old one had come up post haste after him. But that wasn't the worst thing to Father Pink, apparently. It seemed from what I could make out that de Chevreux was engaged to marry some friend of Father Pink's, called Lucretia or something of the kind; and the old one had found that he was playing her

false, having made arrangements with another lady altogether. The old one had seemed to make pretty certain of getting the diamonds back, or his share of them, by the way he talked ; but the question of the young lady was a different thing altogether, and I could see that that was the point he stuck on : so much so, that it seems he had sent to the other young lady's father—your friends I suppose, sir—and blown the whole thing to him. Well, there had evidently been a pretty row all round, sir, and the gentleman you took home in the cab had his attack in consequence, I suppose. And when he had gone, the young one accused the old one of ruining him and giving away the show.

“ But the more the young one raged the cooler the old one got ; and says he at last, ‘ Well, give me the diamonds, and go to this girl you have robbed. Sure, Lucretia is well rid of you, and she has spirit enough to show it.’

“ ‘ Give you the diamonds—my diamonds ! ’ shrieks the young one. ‘ I’ll see you damned first.’ And he clutches at his coat, where I expect they were.

“ ‘ You will give me them,’ says Father Pink, quietly, and by his face you would have thought he was as pleased as Punch. ‘ You know you will have to give me them.’

“ Well, at that the young man gives a yell and rushes at him. I thought Father Pink’s last hour had come, but he lifts his arm and brushes the other away as if he had been a spider, and he takes hold of him and picks him up and puts him into a chair—he must be as strong as an elephant—and he quietly undoes the other’s coat, and takes out a little leather case.

“ ‘ Thank you, my boy. I hope they are all there. I will take them to Lucretia, with your love,’ says he, ‘ and don’t you ever cross my path again or hers,’ he says, turning suddenly on him with a black look that made the young one turn white. And he goes quietly out of the door.

“ He did not close it behind him, as I could see ; and the other stood looking after him for a second, as if he was dazed. Then suddenly he gives another yell, draws a knife from his pocket, and runs at the old priest’s back.

“ Well, I couldn’t see any more, for they were out in the passage by that time, sir ; but I heard a cry that sounded like some one in trouble, and I ran round to the front door to interfere. But it was fast locked, and I could not budge it, and one or two windows I tried were fastened too. Then I

tried the back door, and there I managed to get in. But I had wasted some time, and when I got to the passage where I had last seen the two of them there was only one there. It was de Chevreux, and he was stabbed to the heart. He was no match for that old man, sir."

"But Father Pink?" asked Western quickly.

"He had cleared out while I was trying to get in at the windows, sir—cleared out and taken the diamonds with him; trust him for that! They were the first thing I looked for, for I saw that the young one was done; but they had gone right enough. But we have not lost them yet, sir."

"What do you mean? Do you know where Father Pink has gone?"

"I think so, sir. When I saw that the diamonds were gone, and there was nothing to be done in that way, I took another look at de Chevreux, who after all, I believe, had only met his deserts, and I saw that he was still breathing a little. Well, bad as he was, I had got to help him, and I went foraging round the house till I came across a drop of brandy, and managed to get him to take it. He pulled up for a minute after that, but only to say a few words, and I believe it was really hate more than brandy that gave him

strength. 'It was Father Pink that killed me,' he says, gnashing his teeth, 'and he robbed me too of a lot of jewels. But I know where he will hide till he can send for her to join him. Go—Waterhouse Street—Docks—12—corner,' he says, and then he stops. 'No,' he says, suddenly; 'I don't know who you are. It's a lie, and I'm not going to die after all. I'm getting better.' Then he says some name, a French girl's name it sounded like, and I could see that he was dead.

"Well, when it was all over, and you didn't come, I drew him into one of the rooms, and went to have a look round the house, to see if mayhap Father Pink was not there after all. But I could find nothing of him, nor anything else that might help us afterwards, sir; and I was just going to clear out and wait for you at the other end of the road, to stop you coming too near, when I heard you creeping about the house. I took a look at you when your match flashed up, sir, and whether it was your matchbox that caught the light, or whether my nerves had got a bit jumpy, I don't know, but I could have sworn I caught sight of a constable's helmet, and I thought I was in for it. There was a murdered man down there in the room where

I had drawn him ; there was blood in the passage, and for anything I knew on my clothes ; and there was I searching the house with nothing to explain my appearance there, or why I had not called for help. So I concluded to leave before another match was lighted, sir. But I thought it was a near thing when I knocked the box out of your hand."

"So did I," returned Western, laughing as he remembered that his own fright had been hardly less than his companion's ; "an exceedingly near thing. And so de Chevreux is dead ? How strange !"

And the young man's thoughts flew back to his interview with Renée Desilles that afternoon. How different the future looked now ! And then he remembered the diamonds and Father Pink. "That scoundrelly old priest, at all events, has no possible claim to those diamonds, Wick," he said.

"None, I suppose, sir ; but he's got them, and that's better than most claims. But, if you take my advice, we'll get them yet, sir. I am not fond of giving up things I once start, and I have a score to settle with that fat old priest, sir."

"So have I, Wick," said Western. "And we will beat the old scoundrel yet."

CHAPTER XVI

THE DAWN OF HOPE

“**N**OW, sir,” said the process-server, as he finished his drink and looked at his watch, “I think I know where Father Pink has gone. De Chevreux seemed to think that he would wait there for some lady—this Lucretia, I suppose. What do you say, sir? Shall we trust to that, or shall we have a look round to-night? We may need to investigate a bit in any case first, for, though if we got the old rascal alone we need make small bones about asking him to hand over those stones, if he isn’t alone, but has some of those rascally aliens of his with him, we might have to be a bit more diplomatic.”

Western considered for a moment. “I think I should like to call at Mr. Desilles’ house before I do anything else,” he said at last. “I am very anxious about him, and Miss Desilles is all alone and will be anxious too. When I have been there, and if he is going on all right, I shall be ready for our

friend the priest, and we will at least have a look at this place de Chevreux mentioned. What a fortunate thing his hatred enabled him to give you the hint. Without it we should have had small chance of catching Father Pink, I fear. And even as it is I have my doubts, the old rascal is so infernally clever."

Wick nodded. "He is clever, sir, ain't he?" he said, "but we may be cleverer; we'll see. And now, if you want to see your friend, we had better be off, sir. Afterwards we will have a look at No. 12, Waterhouse Street."

The landlord of the public-house, who seemed to know Wick well and to have a great respect for him, insisted on hailing a hansom for the two companions and seeing them into it, and they drove away towards Renée Desilles' home.

"Miss Desilles can see you, sir, and the master is much better," said the shabby little maid, in answer to Western's inquiries, as she showed him in; and Renée herself confirmed the news when she descended to the dingy sitting-room a few moments later.

"How kind of you to come; papa is ever so much better, and—ah, don't," she broke off, as Western, thrilled at the light his

appearance had brought to her eyes, stepped forward and caught her hands.

"Forgive me, Renée," he said tenderly; "but you look so sad, and I believe I shall have good news for you so soon. I have news even now which I think cannot be anything but good, but I must not tell you yet. So your father is better? I am so glad of that."

"Not only better, but he is almost well again," said the young girl, "and he wants to see you. He heard that it was you who brought him home, and he has wished to see you ever since. He hoped you would come back."

"But do you think he is strong enough?" asked Western, anxiously.

"Yes, I am sure he is; and the doctor thinks so too. He said it would be better for papa to see you than to worry as he was doing. There is something important he wants to ask you about, or to tell you, and he will not rest till it is done. Will you come up?"

Western followed her up to the room where Desilles still lay helpless, but looking very different to the unconscious man he had last seen.

Desilles grasped Western's hand in silence

for a moment, as Renée closed the door and left them together. "I am very grateful to you, Mr. Western," he said at length. "I did not know at the time that it was you who were picking me up, but my little girl has told me of your kindness. But there is more than that on my mind, Mr. Western. I am afraid I have been discourteous to you, even ungrateful. You were concerning yourself with our unhappy fortunes, it seems, while I was merely allowing myself to become the prey of a couple of scoundrels——"

"I did no more than I was compelled," said Western quickly. "My father, unfortunately, was originally, I am afraid, the cause of your troubles; and I, in the second place, played weakly into the hands of your enemies. The least I could do was to attempt to put things straight."

"I know," returned Desilles, "and I, like a fool, treated you coldly and flung myself into the arms of those blackguards. And to think that I would have given Renée to that infernal——"

Western stopped him quickly. "He was a villain, I think," he said, "but he is dead."

Desilles sat up in bed, his eyes staring. "Dead!" he exclaimed.

Western nodded, rather fearful of the effect his story must have on the invalid.

"Do you think you had better hear it all now?" he asked, doubtfully. "Are you strong enough?"

Desilles waved the words aside. "It is suspense that kills men like me," he said quickly. "Tell me all; I assure you it will be better for me than waiting."

He listened with intense excitement while Western told his story, and then sank back on his pillow again; but Western saw to his relief that he was not in danger of a further attack.

"Thank Heaven you told me," he said at last. "Why, you have lifted a weight from my heart that has gone very near to crush it lately. But I am overwhelmed; what a fool I have been! And de Chevreux dead? How strange; how sad, too, for he has good points, I assure you, Mr. Western, though he behaved like a scoundrel towards the end. And so Hillersley is mine now after all, and Renée will at least have something left. I fear, however, that it will not be very much, for between them Father Pink and de Chevreux seem to have played ducks and drakes with the property. How the money has gone I know not, but I suspect

upon the French Royalist cause. I had always an idea that Father Pink was one of their men, and led de Chevreux where he would."

Western nodded. "I know nothing of that," he said. "But I fear that you are right about the property; still there are the——"

"The diamonds?" said Desilles, quickly. "But they are gone for ever. If you are thinking of making any further effort in that direction, let me beg of you not to. You have gone into enough danger for us; you must take no more risks. This stroke of mine has been a lesson to me, and I am determined to exercise the virtue of content. It is not such very great virtue after all," he continued, "for I have got Hillersley now. But I have a feeling that that fat old priest is too dangerous a man to tackle any more, and, if you take my advice, Mr. Western, you will leave him alone."

Western smiled. "I assure you I also have a wholesome respect for Father Pink's capabilities," he said. "And as the jewels are yours, after all you have the right to do more than command. Still I must confess I should like to have one more tussle with that fat old humbug; and those diamonds

would be a worthy gift for Miss Desilles."

Desilles' eyes sparkled. "If I was only up and well," he said, belying his former speech, "I would ask nothing better than an attempt to give her them—poor Renée—but that is different."

"Then why grudge me what you would like yourself?" said Western, laughing. "But we will say no more about it for the present. I am afraid you must be feeling the effects of this long talk and the news I have brought. I had better call Miss Desilles, and say good-bye."

And anxious to escape further discussion which might expose his plans, and so raise hopes which might perhaps prove baseless, he made his way quickly downstairs, and finding Renée, said farewell to her in the hall. "I may have news for your father to-morrow which will cheer him even more than that I brought to-night," he said, as he held her hand and felt her fingers return the pressure of his own. "And to-morrow I shall have a question to ask you, Renée. I wonder what the answer will be."

The young girl looked up quickly into his eyes, but he only smiled and was gone.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRIEST AT BAY

“**M**R. DESILLES is much better,” said Western to Wick, whom he found waiting for him outside. “And now we will go and have a look for Father Pink. But where is this Waterhouse Street?”

“Right down by the Docks, sir. I know the neighbourhood, and it’s pretty rough. But it is the kind of place where a man can hide well enough, and which he can slip away from easily, too.”

“He won’t have slipped away yet,” said Western, remembering the priest’s evident attachment to Lucretia; “he will wait for his niece to join him first, as de Chevreux said.”

“Well, we had better take a cab down to the Minories, and walk along St George’s Road. It is a turning off there,” said the process-server. “Luckily it is dark enough for anything, and we don’t run much chance of being recognized. If we were to be seen

by that fat old rascal, he would lead us a pretty chase, I expect."

Western had never before been in the quarter of London where Father Pink's hiding-place lay, but to his companion it seemed familiar ground; and he made his way among the narrow evil-smelling streets with unerring speed.

He stopped Western at last, holding him by the sleeve, by a narrow archway at the corner of a dirty street.

"This is Waterhouse Street, sir," he whispered, "and this is No. 12, here, under this archway: see, here, 'Patrick McGrath, Dealer in Animals.' Wild beasts, I expect. There are lots deal in them round here; they get them from the ships, or from Amsterdam, and hire them out to the Circus folk. Well, if Patrick McGrath has got a cunninger animal than that old priest in his place, I shall be surprised, that's all."

Stepping cautiously, he led the way, in the darkness, round under the archway, till at their side they could see a tumble-down flight of steps leading up to the top floor of the building whose courtyard the archway led into, the ground floor being apparently used merely for the purpose of storage.

Wick lighted a match cautiously, for the

place was almost entirely in darkness, and examined the stairs. "Yes, it's up here," he said; "here's a printed board, and I think I hear the animals. Wait here a moment, sir, and I'll go and see."

He returned in a few moments. "Yes, that's the place right enough, sir," he whispered. "But I don't know whether there is any one there or not, the beasts keep up such a row."

They waited a few moments, the darkness of the place and the occasional cries of the animals, having at length quite an uncanny effect on Western's nerves. But no sign of human existence came from the house above them, and at length Wick shook himself. "We shall get the jumps if we wait here much longer listening to those animals, and doing nothing," he said. "I think I will go upstairs and interview Mr. McGrath. It is not likely that Father Pink will be anywhere in sight, and I can make up a story to explain my appearance easily enough, if he isn't. Keep a look-out for any one coming, sir." And, turning up his coat collar, the process-server mounted the steps again.

He was some minutes gone, but he returned at last and drew Western quickly away from the archway into the farthest and

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darkest corner of the courtyard. "It's all right," he whispered. "I pitched my yarn and I could see it was swallowed. I saw McGrath himself, and I don't think he has any idea there is anything dangerous on hand. But I dare say he is hiding the old priest all the same. I could see nothing, though. He's got a lot of animals there, but it's only a long bare room with cages down each side, and I don't think he lives there himself. There's another room with the door shut, however, and, if he's ~~anywhere~~, **Father Pink's** there. But we'll wait and see. McGrath was just going out when I went up; he was putting his coat on. If we hide here quietly, he won't see us when he goes, and we will have a glance round. I can open the door all right: I had a squint at the lock while I was talking. Even if McGrath himself should come back, we should only be in for a bit of a scrimmage. It's a dangerous game anyway that we are playing, and we must take the rough with the smooth; but we have always got the consolation of knowing that Father Pink does not want more noise than can be helped. We need not be afraid of the police."

They waited in silence after this, and by and by they heard the door at the top of the

stairs open, and a man came heavily down. "It's McGrath," whispered Wick; "he's a big heavy man."

The animal dealer descended the steps, paused for a moment to light his pipe under the archway, and passed on his way. Wick nudged his companion. The way was clear.

Another few moments, and, making their way across the courtyard, they softly climbed the stairs. At the door of the animal dealer they stopped and listened for a moment, but they could hear nothing but the cries of the beasts; and Wick, producing his wonderful belt, commenced silently to pick the lock.

He stopped for a moment during the process, for it had seemed to both him and his companion that, through the restless movements and cries of the animals, had come a clang like the shutting of the door of a cage; but the sound was not repeated, and he continued his task.

In a few minutes the work was done, and the door opened. With a little thrill Western stepped into the room, followed by Wick. Was Father Pink really hiding here alone? And would he give up the diamonds without a struggle?

The room in which they found themselves

was, as Wick had said, merely a long bare apartment, with cages down each side. These cages were dark and evil-smelling, but they were open to the day, and it was evident that the various animals they contained were their only occupants.

"It is certain he is not in this room," said Wick, drawing Western away from a cage, the largest in the room, which held an enormous tiger, who growled viciously. "But take care, sir, that brute was trying to put its paw through the bars at you. Poor brute, how dark its cage is ; no wonder it is fierce."

"No, it is certain he is not here," replied Western. "But what about that door over there ?"

"That's where I think he is," said Wick, eyeing the door. "We will see. If there are any more of them, we shall have a tussle when we open it. You stand by, sir, for a rush."

And they stepped across the room, and opened the door. But only to give a cry of disappointment ; for the room into which it gave was a small one, and as empty of human life as the one through which they had just passed.

Blankly they stared into it, and then looked into one another's faces.

"Then he's not here," said Western at last; "and de Chevreux was wrong."

And then suddenly they both turned, for behind them had come the sound of a footstep. And both started violently. They had expected to see Father Pink in front of them as they opened the door, but they had not expected to find him behind them as they shut it. Yet there he was, in the middle of the large room, standing there quite at his ease, and smiling benevolently upon them, as if they had been the people whom of all the world he most wished to see.

"Where the devil did you come from?" said Wick, confused and startled; and Western in spite of himself burst into a short laugh.

But Father Pink only continued to smile gently upon them. "My dear Western," he commenced, and then, seeing the expression on the young man's face, he stopped suddenly, and moving quickly to the door by which they had entered, he locked it, and taking out the key, threw it into the middle of the floor.

"Now let us have a talk," he said.

His sudden arrival of itself had disconcerted Western and his companion, and his coolness staggered them still more. For a moment therefore they stood looking at

him silently. Then at last Western pulled himself together.

"You have killed de Chevreux," he said, "and robbed him of some diamonds which, in the first place, never belonged to him. I have reason to believe that in the case of de Chevreux's death you only acted in self-defence, and with that therefore I do not propose to interfere ; that is a matter between yourself, your conscience and the authorities, to whom in certain contingencies I will not betray you. But as regards the diamonds, I want them."

Father Pink smiled benevolently. "So do I, my boy," he said.

"I want them," continued Western, "to return to their rightful owners."

"And who might they be ?" asked Father Pink.

"I think you know," replied Western. "But if you do not, I will tell you. Their rightful owner is Mr. Desilles, the Countess de Chevreux's brother."

"Dear, dear," said Father Pink, nodding his head. "And he has a pretty daughter, hasn't he ? Ah, you young men !"

"It is unnecessary to discuss Miss Desilles here," said Western quickly. "We had better stick to the diamonds, I think."

"But, my dear boy, that is what I have every intention of doing," said Father Pink. "And do—you must forgive an old man for advising you—*do* let me beg of you not to try to interfere with my possession of those very valuable stones."

"I am sorry not to be able to take your advice in this case," said Western, trying to keep as cool as the cynical Father, but only partly succeeding. "I mean to have the stones before either you or we leave this room, unless, of course, they are not upon you. In those circumstances, we would help you to go and get them."

Father Pink rubbed his broad forehead in dismay. "Sure, you wouldn't take them from me!" he said, piteously. "It's not for myself I ask it. But you saw my little Lucretia; you heard her play, now, didn't you? She'll have nothing when I'm gone, poor little girl. It's for her I want them, Western, my boy; to save her from want when I am gone. You are a young man; you must have a heart to feel for a poor old fellow who wants to—— Look now, will you take half, and let the old man go back to his ewe lamb?"

Western frowned. "Are you doing this to take up time?" he asked sternly. "Have you some scheme on——"

Father Pink expanded his huge chest, and threw his arms wide in expostulation. "Scheme, my boy. Now is that just ! I find you intruding in a house which is not mine certainly, but which I am occupying with the permission of its proprietor ; you have broken in—for although the key still acts properly, you must have picked the lock in some way, you know—and your object, two of you against a poor old man, is to force me to give you some very valuable jewels, which certainly do not belong to you, and were given to me by my dear friend who is just dead. And when I ask you to have a quiet talk, defenceless as I am, you talk of schemes ! Now—though your father saved my life, Mr. Western, and I shall never forget it—is that fair ? "

" You are right in saying that there are two of us," said Western, " though I think you can hardly call yourself a poor old man, judging by the agility I have seen you display on several occasions. Still, as you are only one and we are two, and you will hardly care to call for help under the circumstances, don't you think you had better give us the stones, rather than compel us to take them ? "

" Good heavens ! " cried Father Pink, moving backwards. " You would not use force ? "

" It is evident that we shall be obliged to,"

said Western, stepping forward. "But take care!" he cried involuntarily, for Father Pink, in his retreat, had backed up against the cage of the tiger which had so nearly seized himself a short time before.

Father Pink turned and looked at the huge ferocious-looking brute. "Ah, she won't hurt me, though she would tear ninety-nine men out of a hundred to pieces where I stand now. It has been my lot, Mr. Western, to spend many days in seclusion in this place—I have had a troubled life, my boy; you may smile: you mightn't think it from my appearance, but I have had a hard life and many enemies—and I have spent many hours (I never lose a chance of making a friend here and there) in putting myself on the best of terms with this great silly cat here. I have a way with me—but I must not boast, and sure my way does not help me much with you, my boy; look at the diamonds!—I have a way with me on occasions—it's my Irish blood I suppose—and it has helped me to get on friendly terms with pussy here. See now, look here!"

Western and Wick stood paralysed, their eyes almost starting from their heads with amazement, for as he spoke the fat priest coolly opened the door of the great tiger's

cage, and stepped inside, slamming the iron bars behind him.

In spite of Father Pink's boastful words they fully expected to see him torn instantly to pieces, but the great beast merely stared at him, sweeping the floor with its tail ; and when the priest moved boldly towards it, absolutely fawned upon him.

"Now, Western, my boy, let this be a lesson to you," said Father Pink, placidly patting the tiger. "Make friends wherever you can, you never know when they may come in useful. And never make an enemy," he continued, in a tone suddenly so menacing that Western almost started back. "And, by the way, one more piece of advice : always keep a back way of escape open, a door to retreat by when your enemy outnumbers you."

As he spoke he stepped to the back darkness of the cage, and Western heard the sound of a bar being withdrawn.

"Stop him, sir ; he's got a way out there !" cried Wick, hurling himself recklessly at the cage. But Western as swiftly clutched him and drew him back. Yet even in that brief instant the tiger's claw had flashed through the bars and ripped the process-server's sleeve to ribbons.

From a safe distance they stood and peered into the dimness of the back of the cage, while the now furious tiger shook the bars and paced wildly up and down. And Father Pink's voice reached their ears again: "A door to retreat by, ah, here it is! Don't forget my advice, Western, my boy, will you? And shut the door behind you, my boy, shut the door behind you." And, suiting the action to the word, Father Pink vanished.

Wick, with a cry of rage, seized the key from the floor where the priest had thrown it, ran to the door, opened it, and dashed down the stairs; but in a moment or two he returned, crestfallen.

"He did not come out into the yard at all, sir," he said, gloomily. "That door in the cage there must lead out into another street or house altogether, and he's gone. The crafty old scoundrel! To think that he has done us after all. But did you see him with the tiger, sir? Why, the brute nearly had my arm off from here. She would have done, but that you pulled me back. That's the second time you have saved me, sir."

"You were rather too near her, certainly," said Western. "There is no doubt she would kill either of us as soon as look at us, and with all respect for those diamonds they

are not worth getting in that way. But I could kick myself for the way that old rascal fooled us, Wick. I shall be ashamed to look Mr. Desilles in the face."

"I don't know that we are done yet," said the process-server, thoughtfully. "Father Pink's still in London. It is true London's a big place. Still, I've an idea he won't go far away, sir, for after all there's the young lady. Now, I don't think she can have come up from Hillersley yet, however great her haste, since Father Pink killed de Chevreux and, I suppose, sent for her. Surely she was to meet him here—de Chevreux thought she would—and in that case we have only got to wait for her."

Western frowned. "It sounds simple enough with any one but Father Pink," he said. "With him everything grows complicated at once. Yet you must be right. But why do you think he kept us talking so long, Wick? He could have escaped long before he did and he could hardly have hoped really to bargain with us."

"Lord knows," said Wick, despondently. "It is hard to say what he might have been getting at, sir. I wish I could smother that tiger and have a look at that door he went out at. That might tell us a lot."

"It would probably," returned Western, looking at the tiger, now a little calmer, meditatively. "But not knowing how to smother a tiger, I am afraid I can't help you, Wick. But we had better not stay here any longer. There is nothing to wait for now, and it is useless to risk being discovered by the owner of the place. What time is it?"

"Goodness, it is past twelve," said Wick, looking at his watch; "what a time we have been!"

"Then Lucretia, Father Pink's niece, cannot possibly arrive from Hillersley to-night, unless she too has a motor-car, and I do not think that is likely. It is useless therefore to watch for her to-night. The best thing we can do, Wick, is to go home and to bed. We will be here at daybreak, however, to-morrow, and if she comes we will shadow her; but, Wick, I have an uncomfortable feeling that Father Pink is going to be too much for us. And Miss Lucretia, herself, I assure you is no fool."

"Takes after her uncle, I suppose, sir. Well, I dare say you are right, sir. There is nothing more to be done to-night, and we had better go home. I will be about here the first thing in the morning. I had better get myself up a bit different though, sir,

for Father Pink would know me in the daylight unless I did. But what about you, sir?"

"I never thought of that, Wick," returned Western; "and Lucretia knows me too."

"Then I will tell you what," said Wick, after a few moments' consideration. "There is a little coffee-house near here, at the corner of Clinton Street and this road. You go there as soon as you arrive to-morrow, taking care you are not noticed from here, and I will look in and tell you what is going."

"Yes, that is the best way," said Western. "I will be there at seven. At the corner of this street and Clinton Street, you said?"

"Yes, sir, 'The Bull,' it is called. But let us get out of here, sir. That cage makes me wild every time I look at it."

And they made their way disconsolately downstairs, after shutting the door carefully behind them.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FATHER SCORES

WESTERN spent a restless night, haunted by dreams in which the murdered de Chevreux, Father Pink, and even the diamonds played their part, and the next morning found him early astir.

He swallowed a hasty breakfast and by seven o'clock he was already on his way to the place appointed by Wick for their meeting. "I wish it was Renée I was going to see," he thought. "Bother those wretched diamonds; I have been so near to getting them on two occasions, I wonder if I am to fail as lamentably on the third? But where is this coffee-house Wick mentioned?"

He had come almost to the corner of Waterhouse Street and walked warily, looking about him. He felt that, if he were to have any chance of success that day with Father Pink, it was necessary that that worthy should not catch a glimpse of him

again in that neighbourhood ; and he hoped that Wick's disguise would prove an efficient one. "What a good fellow that queer chap has turned out," he thought, with a smile. "But whether we beat Father Pink eventually, or he beats us, I will take care that *he* comes out of it all right."

After some searching—for it was an unobtrusive little place—he came at last to the coffee-house where he was to wait for the process-server ; and entering through the swing doors, which gave admittance to a large room with sanded floors, he took a seat at one of the wooden benches running round the walls.

He noted with satisfaction that he was the only person present and, ordering a cup of coffee, set himself to wait for Wick's arrival.

The little slip-shod girl who waited upon him eyed him for a time with admiration, evidently unaccustomed to clients of Western's appearance ; and at last she approached him.

"Are you the gent that's waiting for some one ?" she asked in a whisper which was intended to be cautious, but nevertheless resounded through the room.

"I dare say," returned Western. "Yes,

it is likely that some one—that a friend of mine will come here for me.”

“ Oh, lor’, this ain’t a friend of yours,” said the girl, with a little giggle. “ It’s only a common loafer. He said he was expecting a gentleman to come here, but I didn’t listen to his nonsense.”

“ It might have been me that he meant, nevertheless,” said Western quickly, suspecting a successful disguise on Wick’s part. “ Did he leave any message ? ”

“ He said, tell him I will look in a little later,” said the girl, with a shrug of her shoulders. “ But here he is.”

Western looked up quickly, as a shabby specimen of the out-of-work class entered the room and took a glance round.

Western stared at him and the girl at his side tittered. “ You see, that ain’t your friend, is it ? ” she said.

But the loafer stepped quickly forward and spared Western’s embarrassment. “ Good-morning, captain,” he said, easily. “ I have got the pup for you, and a nice little dorg he is.” It was Wick.

He sat down by Western’s side, and when the girl, apparently satisfied, though still mystified, departed about her business, he whispered quickly. “ The young lady’s here

already. She must have come up by the first train. She went straight to McGrath's, and she's there now, talking to him, I expect. She won't find Father Pink there of course; but it's ten to one he contrives to send her word where to look for him. We must follow her when she comes out. Now the question is, shall I go alone, or will you come, sir? They won't recognize me."

"Certainly not; your disguise is splendid, Wick," said Western.

"We have to do all kinds of things in the Private Inquiry where I was, sir, and I'm used to that. I am glad you didn't know me, though. But you, sir? The young lady will know you; still, on the other hand, you ought to come, or we shall lose touch of one another."

"I must risk it, Wick, I suppose. I can turn up my coat collar, and trust to Providence."

"Then come quick, sir," said Wick. "There is no time to waste. You had better keep a good way behind me when we see her start, and I'll keep as far as I can behind her. Don't come so far as the archway with me, sir. You must wait outside here. If you hear a loud whistle, you will know we have gone the other way; but if you catch

sight of us coming in this direction, just you dodge in here again till we have got past and take a peep out of the window."

Western nodded and the process-server went out. The young man waited a few moments and then, making his way into the street, took up a position from which he could watch the corner of Waterhouse Street.

But for a long while he waited in vain for any sign of Wick and Lucretia; and gradually his mind began to dwell on this strange girl and the life she must have led with the rascally old priest, apparently her only guardian. Had she loved de Chevreux, he wondered, and was she broken-hearted at the man's betrayal of herself and his terrible end? How pretty she was and how cleverly she had duped him! And then he started and stepped quickly back again through the swinging doors of the coffee-house, for Lucretia herself was coming towards him down the road.

Had she seen him? Western doubted it, for his movement had been swift, yet he blamed himself for having allowed his thoughts to wander, for certainly in another second she must have noticed him.

He peered out between the swing-doors, cautiously, permitting himself only a very

small gap, and watched the girl go by. Her face was pale and set, Western thought; but there were no traces of grief on her pretty cheeks or in her green eyes, only an expression of excitement and concentration, as it seemed to Western, and he felt that she was aware of the struggle that was going on and was already carrying out her instructions.

"She's on her way now to join Father Pink, and they are both going to bolt," thought Western. "But she does not know that we are after them. Yet, poor little thing, I bear *her* no malice."

In a few seconds Wick came by, casting a glance at the coffee-house as he passed; and Western stepped again into the road and followed him cautiously.

There was little fear on this occasion, at least, that he would be caught, for Wick was keeping far behind Lucretia, and though Western followed him at a closer interval, he would have been at too great a distance for the girl to recognize him even had she turned. But she did not turn. Looking neither to right nor left of her, she walked straight on and the two men followed silently.

It soon became evident that Lucretia was

making her way in the direction of the docks, for above the tops of the houses could be seen the masts of the shipping, and the air became heavy with the peculiar smell which is inseparable from the neighbourhood of a port.

At length they turned into a street where the majority of the buildings appeared to be offices of the smaller shipping companies, and Western noticed that Wick drew in a little closer to Lucretia.

"He thinks she is going to take passages for somewhere," he thought, "and, by Jove, it looks like it."

For, as he surmised, the girl turned quickly into one of the offices and Wick halted in view of the door.

Western looked about him for a moment and then, noticing a convenient doorway near at hand, ensconced himself within it to await developments. In a few minutes Lucretia emerged and came towards Western. He allowed her to pass, keeping well in the shadow of the doorway, and then glanced round for Wick, who was nowhere to be seen. While Western was still wondering what to do, however, the process-server suddenly came running up.

"She's taken two passages for Hamburg,"

he said quickly. "The boat sails at three. I asked. They're off. Come on, sir; we must not lose sight of her now until we get to Father Pink."

He darted off in pursuit of Lucretia, who was already far ahead, and Western followed closely.

On this occasion, however, the object of their pursuit appeared to be much less decided in her plans. She no longer walked straight ahead as if towards some definite object, but rather sauntered along, once or twice even retracing her footsteps, to Western's great discomfort, and once she entered a shop, making considerable purchases, to judge by the time she kept the two watchers waiting. Then at last, as if suddenly deciding on some new move, she hailed a hansom and, giving the man his directions, drove rapidly off.

Fortunately Western had drawn nearer to Wick by this time and, there being another cab at hand, they were able to get into it, and direct the man to follow the first vehicle.

"I wonder what's up now," said Wick, as they gazed steadily through the window at the cab in front. "I'm convinced she has arranged to meet Father Pink somewhere."

Has she been spinning out time for the last hour ? ”

“ I fancy so,” returned Western, “ and probably the hour of the appointment has come. It is now nearly eleven ; what time does the boat sail ? ”

“ At three sharp, sir. They’re off to Hamburg. They will get rid of the stones there easily enough. Hullo ! she’s pulling up.”

It was true. The young girl had stopped her cab and descended a few yards in front of them. Western and his companion shrank back into the cab, while she paid her cabman and stood for a minute or so looking carefully round her. Fortunately their vehicle was almost hidden from her sight by a large van that stood near and she did not see them, while they watched her movements eagerly.

The young girl turned at length, apparently satisfied with her survey of the street, and walked quickly into the doorway of the house by which she stood. Western and his companion waited a few seconds, and then descending, dismissed their man and approached the house into which Lucretia had vanished.

It was a big building, evidently consisting of residential flats and they gazed at it in

silence. There was no porter at the entrance to inform them to which apartment Lucretia had gone and the hall, as they looked down it, was empty.

"This is awkward," said Wick, rubbing his chin. "We shall just have to wait till she comes out. These names on the door-post tell us nothing."

When they had waited half an hour, however, and no Lucretia had appeared again, the process-server commenced to fidget. "I hope she is there, sir," he said at last.

"Why, we saw her go in," said Western, surprised.

"I know, sir, but suppose that was a blind. Sometimes these buildings have two entrances and exits. Suppose she has cleared out and left us to cool our heels for nothing. I have known that trick played before, but only when the parties knew they were being followed. That young lady did not catch sight of me, I am certain ; do you think it is possible she saw you, sir ?"

Western flushed. "I do not think so, Wick," he said. "But there was one moment before I followed you from Waterhouse Street when she almost might have. But she must have been infernally quick if she did."

Wick looked serious. "Well, she might

be that with her bringing up," he said. "It will be awkward if I am right, though. I will just run across and have a look at that house."

Western watched him as he crossed the road and disappeared through the open doorway, with a feeling of doubt rising in his heart. He remembered that he had up to the present no reason to question Lucretia's cleverness and quickness. If she *had* recognized him in that brief moment near the coffee-house, Wick might easily be right in his uncomfortable suspicion. And Lucretia gone, it would be his fault.

Presently the process-server appeared again, his usually dismal face alight with excitement. In his fingers he held a crumpled piece of paper.

"Another cab, quick!" he said, taking Western unceremoniously by the arm, and hurrying him in the direction of a cabstand further along the road. "I was right. Ah, that blessed half-hour we have wasted; but we shall do it yet."

Hurrying along to the cabstand, he pushed Western into the nearest vehicle and sprang in after him.

"To the Union Line Dock, London Docks, and drive like steam," he called through

the trap to the cabman. "There will be a sovereign for you, if you make good time."

The man whipped up his horse furiously, the jerk sending Wick on to Western's knees and nearly through the window.

"Right you are, guv'nor," the driver cried. "Me and the old girl'll earn the quid and learn motoring." And away they went.

"What is it?" asked Western eagerly, when they could talk again.

"I was right. There were two ways out of that place, sir. Well, after the time we had waited, when I saw that I knew we were done. But I ran upstairs, a flight or two, just to see if I could notice anything; and at the second floor I came across a man cleaning the staircase windows.

"How long have you been here?" I asked him, as I passed him the price of a drink.

"Long enough to want to leave off this job, guv'nor," he said, "but thank you for the tanner. I've been here a good couple of hours and I've got two more landings to do, if you want to know anything more."

"I do," I said. "Did a lady, a young lady, come up here about half an hour ago?"

"Not her, guv'nor," he said, "nor an old lady either. But a gent came down."

" 'Are you sure ? ' I asked.

" 'Certain,' he said ; so down I came. Well, I was swearing at our luck, when half-way along the passage I suddenly caught sight of this little scrap of paper lying on the floor. I never lose a chance, sir, and I picked it up on spec. And I did right. That young lady is a sharp one, but she made a slip when she dropped this, through being in too much of a hurry, I suppose. But read it, sir."

Western took the scrap of paper and read :
" The Union Line Dock, London Docks ;
ss. *Raven*. Two o'clock."

" And what do you make of it, Wick ? " he asked at length.

The process-server turned his ruminating eye to him. " I make a whole three-volume novel out of it, sir (this mare is getting done, isn't she ?): a whole three-volume novel. But, put short, this is what I think. When that young lady went to the animal dealer's this morning (here we are, no farther than St. Paul's, yet !) she got the news from our friend McGrath that we were on Father Pink's track, and she got her orders for the disposal of her morning. That fat old humbug, Father Pink, guessed that we should be there in the morning, and that we should follow her, hoping she would lead us to him.

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He told her to put us off the scent by booking passages by the *Doric* to Hamburg, and he himself took berths on the *Raven* for Naples."

Western groaned. "The boat is almost due to sail now," he said.

"Yes, sir. That was her game, to keep us till the last moment and then give us the slip. You see, it wouldn't very much matter if she were even to miss the boat, for I expect they know where to meet later. It was a pretty scheme, and if she hadn't dropped that paper where should we have been! But then women, even the cleverest of them, never have anywhere where they can carry anything safely, from their hearts to their purses. But it will be a close shave if the boat starts punctually. There's the Tower."

The cabman was evidently determined to earn the sovereign Wick had promised him, and so too was the mare, apparently, for they charged down Tower Hill at break-neck speed; but it was evident that their steed was getting terribly winded and that she could not keep her pace up much longer.

Still they dashed along, and the funnels of fleets of steamers came in sight. Whistles sounded on every side of them, and they prayed fervently that none of them might belong to the *Raven*, while the cabman

spurred his mare to greater efforts. And then suddenly the end of their drive came.

Whether the mare's exertions had proved too much for her, or whether she slipped on the greasy pavement, they never discovered, but down she came, with a fearful clatter of hooves, literally in sight of port; and they had to scramble from the vehicle as best they could.

Wick threw the cabman the sovereign. "You have done your best," he said. "Help the old girl up gently." And he turned to Western.

"The *Raven* lies this way, sir," he said. "Come quickly!"

They tore along the docks, but even as they came to the end of their journey their hearts grew cold for before them lay the place where the *Raven* had lain and it was empty.

Wick groaned aloud. "Too late!" he said. And a seafaring man, who heard him, approached, sympathetically.

"She's gone," he said—"five minutes ago. If you go to the end of the dock over there, you'll see her come round the corner."

"A lot of good that will do us!" said Wick, furiously; and the seafaring one sheered off.

"We had better have a look at her," said Western, "though it is a poor satisfaction."

And disconsolately they wandered down the docks.

As they reached the spot which the man had pointed out, they stood and watched a large-sized steamer pass slowly by in the distance. She was so far from them that it was difficult to distinguish the different people on board her, yet both Western and his companion singled out a couple who stood a little apart from the rest of the crowd, and strained their eyes to gaze upon them.

"It is Father Pink and Lucretia," said Western, at last; "I should know his figure among a thousand."

"Yes, and it's her, too," said the process-server, shading his eyes. "And what is more, I believe she has seen us and is waving her handkerchief. Look."

A little shred of white certainly fluttered gaily in the river breeze, but whether Wick was right or not it was impossible to say; and soon both handkerchief and figures vanished amidst the forest of masts.

"Good-bye, diamonds," said Wick, turning away. "But, like the old mare, we've done our best. What next, sir?"

"I am afraid there is no next," said

Western. "Unless we care to try revenge. The diamonds are dead to us, I am afraid. But we might inform the police of de Chevreux's death, and so get Father Pink detained at the first stopping-place. I have no fancy for turning informer, myself, however, as it was evident from what you tell me that de Chevreux first tried to kill the priest."

"And a very good try it was, too, sir," returned Wick. "But what about stopping him for stealing the diamonds?"

"That could be done," said Western. "But it is for Mr. Desilles to do. We must get his authority first. And somehow I fancy, as things are, that he will not be anxious to bring the police into this affair for the sake of the diamonds, valuable as they must be. And, after all, there is no proof that even the police would be a match for Father Pink."

"They wouldn't," said Wick, decidedly. "I know something of the police, seeing I was in the Force myself. But they needn't feel hurt when I say so, for I don't think the match for that fat gentleman exists."

CHAPTER XIX

A WEDDING GIFT

WESTERN was right when he doubted whether Mr. Desilles would care to pursue the diamonds farther.

"Let them go, Mr. Western," he said, when the young man saw him and told his story. "Let them go. I am not the man I was before I had that fit and I want a peaceful life in the future. I have got, henceforth, enough to keep me and my daughter in comfort, money that is rightfully mine, and why should I commence again the old anxiety, the wearing chase for more? No; tell the police what you know of de Chevreux's death—I think you ought to—and if they catch Father Pink and the ownership of the jewels comes into question, I may try to prove my claim. Till then, let them go. But they won't catch that man, Western; he is too clever."

"I dare say you are right," said Western. "I don't think he will be caught, nor do

I think the diamonds would be found, if he were. But I will take care the police have all the information I can give them. May I go now and speak to Miss Desilles ? ”

“ Certainly,” replied Desilles, shaking his hand heartily. “ What you have told me has made me extremely glad. I am more than grateful for what you have done for us, and as regards your failure in the matter of those stones, well, I am sure no one could have succeeded against that cunning old priest and his equally clever niece. And now Renée’s future, which was my chief concern, will be doubly secured and I can spend the rest of my days in peace. I was fatally mistaken in de Chevreux, my dear Western. I am confident my little girl will have a good husband in you.”

“ Renée,” said Western, as he made his way to the young girl’s side, in the room where she sat alone, awaiting him, “ I hoped to bring you ten thousand pounds worth of diamonds when I came to-day—doesn’t it sound like a romance, dearest ?—and I bring you nothing but myself after all—myself and my modest fortune. It is not a fair exchange, Renée, and I should not ask you to accept it. But I do. Ah, my darling, I bring your father’s consent ; will

you add yours? I am not rich, Renée; I am not very clever—see what a failure I have made over those diamonds—but I love you with all my heart, darling. Look in my eyes and you will see.”

Renée looked and laughed happily. “I would rather have your eyes to look into than all the diamonds in the world,” she said; “and I should hate to be very rich, I have been poor so long.”

They were married; and Wick was present at the wedding, almost the only witness save Desilles; and soon after the wedding he blossomed forth as a full-blown Private Inquiry Agent. In the pursuit of his profession he is safe, trustworthy and skilful, and usually more successful in the conduct of difficult cases than he was when pitted against the cunning of Father Pink and his pretty niece.

As to the fat priest, he was not stopped on his road to Naples, though he would have been had he touched there. But whether he had too artfully disguised himself or whether he and Lucretia descended from the *Raven* into the middle of the Thames, or whether the piece of paper Lucretia dropped was merely another blind and they had never shipped on board the *Raven* at all, nor been

seen there by Wick and Western, no sign of them was to be discovered when the police boarded the ship at its first port. They vanished into the *Ewigkeit* and the diamonds with them. All but two.

All but two ; for some few days after the announcement of Western and Renée's marriage in the papers, a little package was pressed into Western's hand, as he walked down the street one day, by a ragged little urchin, who took to his heels and disappeared long before Western had succeeded in unfastening the parcel.

This contained two loose diamonds and a letter. The stones were very handsome ones and evidently valuable. The letter, though crumpled from being wrapped round the diamonds, and dingy from the urchin's hands, was neatly written, and ran thus :—

“MY DEAR BOY,—

“You will be surprised to hear from your old friend after all this time, but I have always liked you, both for yourself and because I can never forget your father saved my life ; and Lucretia tells me to say she always liked you because you are so deliciously simple. I don't know what she means ; some story about a dark room, I

believe. And we both feel we have behaved rather badly to you in carrying off under your nose those diamonds you wanted so badly—for that pretty little girl, I expect; oh, you young men! Well, I wanted them, too, for a pretty little girl, and she has got them. But we send you two, one from each of us: Lucretia's is to you with her love (she tells me you made love to her once); mine is to madame, your wife, with my profound consideration.

“And now, my boy, a last word. Don't let these two stones, glittering rubbish, set you thinking how happy you would have been with the rest of them. You wouldn't. There is only one way for a young man to enjoy money and that is to make it. It is true he never does make it while he is young. I never did. But he gets enjoyment out of trying, and it comes in the end. Look at me. All my life I have been trying to make money, and it has come to me now. I am going to settle down and enjoy it. Don't grudge it me, my boy—me, a poor old man, with one foot in the grave; and don't try to come after me and take it from me, for an old man with money is like a lion with her whelps. And now, bless you, my dear young friend, and good-bye; farewell I suppose it

must be, for I don't suppose we shall ever meet again. Yet who knows? the world is such a small place, perhaps we may. Perhaps some day you will come riding gaily along, young and handsome, through the little village—is it south of Italy or north of Spain?—where I sit writing these lines. And in the sun by his little cottage door you will see a poor old man warming himself, with the chickens pecking at his feet and his tabby cat on his knees, and you will say with a kind smile: 'Why, it's

“‘FATHER PINK.’”

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